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2018 ANIME PREVIEW

HELLO KINMOZA! AND THE REST OF THE NEW YEAR LINEUP!

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THE BEST ANIME COMING
YOUR WAY IN 2018!

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Hello!
Kinmoza!
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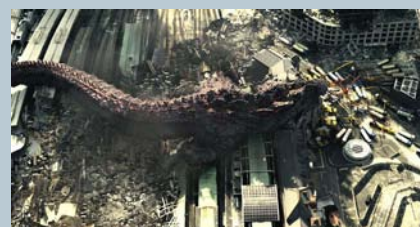
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WELCOME

WELCOME TO issue 171 of NEO! We've reached the end of the year, which means it's time to look forward to the new, and so our issue this month is packed full to the brim with previews! As always our thanks goes out to the distributors for all their help in sourcing information and imagery to

go with our preview features, and also to the patient freelancers who have had to edit and rewrite their pieces to fit the jigsaw-like design of these pages. And, of course, thanks is due to our lovely designer, Claire Trent, who is responsible for how gorgeous the issue looks, every month! So, if you want to find out what 2018 has in store for you, turn to page 008 for a big dose of anime goodness, and for a hit of Asian movie action, head to page 056 for all the news!

We also celebrate one of the biggest JRPGs to come out this year in our flip feature on *Xenoblade Chronicles 2*. Don't let the excellent *Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild* overshadow this equally epic adventure on the Nintendo Switch! If you've got 70+ hours spare over the festive break I can't think of many better ways of spending it. I have to also mention the incredible range of British accents featured in the game too. It was a pure joy to see the franchise return to the UK for its cast, and if you don't love Nia's musical Welsh brogue, you might not have a soul. *Ready or Gormotti!* Turn to the back of this issue to read all about Nintendo's latest triumph on the Switch.

Until next time!

GEMMA COX, EDITOR



MEET THE TEAM

DAVID WEST



"What I really, really want for 2018 is an anime about a teenager trapped inside a videogame piloting a mecha that only

he can control with the help of a sexy catgirl. You know, something original."

JONATHAN CLEMENTS



"Against my will, I have to get a 21st century phone. It's becoming impossible to survive in Asia without something

that can call cabs, validate QR codes, and inform me that everybody else will be late."

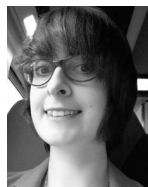
JACOB BONIFACE



"As we head into 2018, my main resolutions are to exercise, eat better, and add to my woefully inadequate manga

collection! I'm hoping to have a full bookcase of them by this time next year!"

LEEANN HAMILTON



"Happy New Year! I've made a list for this issue about making good resolutions / hopeful notes for starting 2018 on

an artistic high note. If these help you out (or don't), let me know! Sláinte!"

TOM SMITH



"After failing every New Year's resolution so far, I'm gunning for something much more achievable for 2018: going to

bed at a socially acceptable time! Pretty sure I'm going to fail that too, though..."

ANDREW OSMOND



"My resolutions are the ones I make every year and never, ever keep: to climb Mount Fuji, to see a Takarazuka (all-

woman musical) performance, and to darn well buckle down and ACTUALLY LEARN JAPANESE."

MITCHELL LINEHAM



"This might sound a little sentimental but I'd love to keep improving as a writer, and to continue working with NEO

throughout the year (and more, of course). Merry Christmas and Happy Holidays, all!"

MICHAEL DODSON



"I don't often have a gaming backlog, but with Nintendo's crazy release schedule recently, I've still got *Worms WMD*, *Pokémon*

Ultra Sun and the recent *Zelda* DLC all untouched. New Year will be time to get it all cleared!"

A FILM BY TAKASHI MIIKE



ROBBIE COLLIN - THE TELEGRAPH



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HEYUGUYS



"WILL BLOW YOUR
SOCKS OFF"

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NEW YEAR, NEW ANIME!

After the busy holidays, it's nice to take a break, plan for the New Year, make some resolutions... oh, and of course, figure out how you're going to find time in just 12 months to watch each and every exciting new anime series! Jacob Boniface is here with just a handful of the great new titles coming out in 2018.





GRANBLUE FANTASY The Next Critical Hit?

Gran is your quintessential fantasy hero – a plucky young man who knows which end of a sword to hold, has an extreme case of wanderlust, and a missing family member who was last seen embarking on a mystical quest. He'd be the perfect protagonist, if he hadn't just been killed by a hydra.

Luckily for Gran, he encountered the ravaging beast while helping the swordswoman Katalina and the mysterious Lyria, a magically-gifted young woman who revives Gran from beyond the grave, forever linking the life force of the two of them. While this would be a problem for most, Gran's new

predicament gives him the perfect excuse to travel the world with Lydia, Katalina, and his dragon-esque companion Vyrne – although in this case, 'travelling the world' is just another name for 'escaping the evil Empire before they recapture Lydia for their fiendish experiments'. Still, there's a sweet airship in the mix as well, so our hero can't complain all that much. *Granblue Fantasy* is based on the 2014 RPG that saw the composer Nobuo Uematsu and art director Hideo Minaba reunite after their work on some of the *Final Fantasy* games. We'll have to see if the series lives up to their creative legacies!

DRAGON BALL SUPER 1:2 Super Super Saiyans!

Fans rejoiced in 2015 at the announcement of *Dragon Ball Super*, the newest *Dragon Ball* series to be put into production for years! In the series' opening salvo, Goku's peaceful life was thrown into disarray upon the arrival of Beerus, the ancient and powerful god of destruction. But now that he's dealt with, surely Goku can go back to a life of rest and relaxation, right? Well, the resurrection of an old enemy means that Goku's retirement plans will have to be put on hold for at least one more adventure, because Frieza, one of Goku's toughest and meanest foes, is back for revenge! But with Goku and Vegeta training, on another planet no less, will they even be able to reach Earth in time to deal with this new threat?

While the first part of *Dragon Ball Super's* debut retold the storyline from the *Battle of Gods* movie, with greater room for development of the *Dragon Ball* universe and its characters – as well as extended fight scenes – this new chapter does the same for *Resurrection F*, the subsequent big-screen adventure. With the greater scope and time afforded to the TV series, it'll be interesting to see how this collection holds up against its cinematic counterpart, as well as what new stories *Dragon Ball Super* has in store for us!





DIMENSION W Coil and Trouble!

In the far-flung future of 2072, the entire planet receives free energy from New Tesla, an energy corporation responsible for the discovery of the titular Dimension W, a fourth-dimension space containing a limitless amount of power. Since the human race began constructing 'Coils' – conduits for the energy of Dimension W – technology has advanced immeasurably, and now Coils are able to power everything from consumer goods to humanoid robots! But while the new world sounds like a utopia, not everyone is happy about the Coil-based advances of the future. Kyouma Mabuchi is a luddite in future terms, a lone-wolf car fanatic who has complete disdain for all things run on Coil technology after the events of his tragic past. So it's a

truly unlikely pairing when he finds himself teaming up with Mira, an unprecedentedly advanced Coil-powered android, and the 'daughter' of the brains behind New Tesla, the missing Shido Yurizaki. Together, the mismatched pair hunt down and put a stop to illegal uses of Coils, while simultaneously unravelling the conspiracies behind New Tesla's activities and Mira's lost father. While *Dimension W* has been running as a manga since 2011, this is the first on-screen adaptation we've seen so far. Directed by Kanta Kamei (*Samurai Champloo* and *Kill Bill*) and with a slick and stylish animation style reminiscent of such classics as *Ghost in the Shell* and *Code Geass*, this could be the action-packed sci-fi series of the year!

ANIME LIMITED: Q1



NAPPING PRINCESS

Kokone in Wonderland?

Dreams and reality collide in *Napping Princess*, the latest work from Kenji Kamiyama, the writer and director behind *Ghost in the Shell: Stand Alone Complex* and *Eden of the East*. Kokone is just a normal girl... who happens to dream of a strange world known as Heartland, a technology-centric fairytale kingdom in which she is the Princess Ancien. Even stranger is the way in which her life in the real world seems to mirror the dreams she has, and vice versa. Both Kokone and Ancien are facing major problems in their lives – Kokone's father has been arrested for a crime he didn't commit, and Ancien is having troubles with a rampaging monster known as the Colossus. But which of the dual lives is the real one – if either? And if they're both as real as each other, will Kokone be able to save the day as both herself and Ancien? Find out in the early parts of 2018!

HAVEN'T YOU HEARD? I'M SAKAMOTO

First Name Unknown...

The first day at a new school is tough for most... but not for Sakamoto! In fact, it seems like there's actually nothing that's difficult for the suave and sophisticated hero of *Haven't You Heard? I'm Sakamoto*, the new offering from animation veterans Studio Deen. The eponymous Sakamoto breezes through life with his suite of super skills – whether it comes to sports, studies, or catching bugs, nothing seems to be able to slow him down! Of course, Sakamoto's apparent perfection leads to some resentment – mixed with admiration – from some of his classmates, but if Sakamoto even notices his rivals' attempts to ruin his day, he doesn't let it show, merely continuing on his mission to be the very best, and help out his friends and classmates along the way. Adapted from the manga by Nami Sano, this slice of (extraordinary) life series might just be one of the strangest comedies to come out next year!



MANGA: APRIL

MVM



FLIP FLAPPERS

Flippin' Crazy!

We're all used to a certain amount of strangeness in our anime – so much so that it even seems commonplace at this point – but there's very few anime series out there that are as purposefully strange as *Flip Flappers*, the upcoming release from MVM! While Cocona seems like a perfectly ordinary high-schooler, she's actually a member of the organization 'Flip Flap', able to transfer into a magical girl persona alongside her new friend and partner

Paprika, and journey into other dimensions in search of wish-granting crystals. While that sounds strange enough on its own, the series has to be seen to truly get a grasp on quite how odd it is – the alternate dimensions that the girls find themselves in are always changing, and always bizarre! With rival teams trying to muscle in on Cocona and Paprika's missions, the mismatched pair will have to work together to win the day!

MVM



SWORD ORATORIA

Dungeon Crawlers!

All of you fantasy fans out there may well already be familiar with *DanMachi*, also known as the incongruously-titled *Is It Wrong To Try And Pick Up Girls In A Dungeon?*. Based on the spin-off series of light novels, published alongside those of *DanMachi*, *Sword Oratoria* focuses on the ensemble cast of Loki Familia, a prestigious adventuring guild whose members delve deep into the monster-infested dungeon that sprawls below the city of Orario. A prominent warrior of their ranks is none other than this series' heroine Aiz Wallenstein, the skilled knight previously seen saving the bacon of Bell Cranel, the protagonist of *DanMachi* (who makes an appearance in the spin-off himself from time to time as well). *DanMachi* was definitely a surprise hit upon its initial release in 2015, and so fans should jump at the chance to get their hands on this series, which expands upon the previously established lore and characters of this action-packed fantasy world.

SWORD ART ONLINE: ORDINAL SCALE

Virtual Insanity!

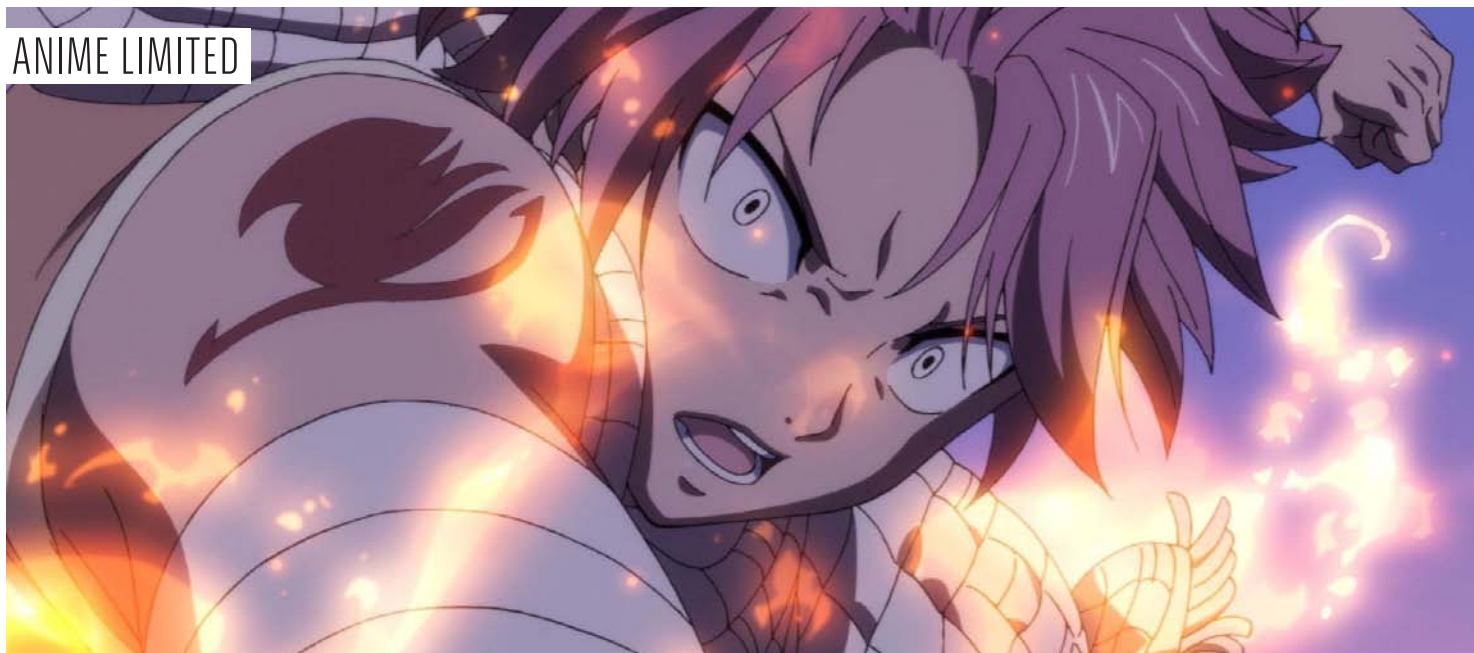
You'd think, after being trapped in a virtual reality MMO for months of their life, not to mention almost being killed – for real – in said game multiple times, that Kirito and Asuna, the heroes of *Sword Art Online*, would find a new hobby. Like knitting, or maybe soothing watercolours. Luckily for us viewers, the pair decide to take up a new challenge in the form of *Ordinal Scale*, the hot new virtual reality game on the scene. Although they don't get trapped this time, there does seem to be something more to the game than meets the eye...

Alongside their friends and fellow party members, will Kirito and Asuna's past skills and experiences be enough to make it to the top levels of *Ordinal Scale*, while also solving the mysteries that the game holds, in both the real world and the virtual one?



ANIME LIMITED: Q1

ANIME LIMITED



FAIRY TAIL DRAGON CRY

Enter the Dragon!

The greatest (and most destructive) mage's guild in all of Fiore is back for a second feature-length adventure! Set before the series' final arc, *Dragon Cry* follows Natsu and his cadre of spell-slinging friends as they journey to the Kingdom of Stella to retrieve the missing Dragon Cry, a magical staff of untold value and power. With years of magical adventuring experience, Natsu, Lucy, Erza, and the rest seem like they should have this job taken care of in no time... but both the staff and the plot to steal it have hidden secrets, and even Natsu's draconic powers might not be enough to take on the mysterious figures behind this high-stakes heist!

The director of the movie, Tetsuya Minamikawa, was a guest at London Comic Con last May, and while *Dragon Cry* is the first time he's worked on a creative project in the world of *Fairy Tail*, his resumé as director includes such movie hits as *Naruto Shippuden: The Movie* and *Bleach: Fade to Black*, so he's definitely proven his shonen credentials time and time again!

Having received a limited theatrical release earlier in the year, *Fairy Tail: Dragon Cry* already wowed cinema-going audiences with its fast-paced magical action, but for those of you who want to watch it at home, the movie will be available some time in 2018!

MANGA: JANUARY - MARCH



DBZ MOVIE COLLECTIONS FOUR, FIVE AND SIX Triple Dragons!

The New Year sees not only a new series of *Dragon Ball* action in the form of *Dragon Ball Super*, but also a whole bunch of classic stories, as the fourth, fifth, and sixth movie collections of *Dragon Ball Z* are released as digitally remastered Blu-ray / DVD combos! With new action series coming out all the time, 2018 could be the year that *Dragon Ball* returns to remind us all why it was the king of the world of shonen for so long.

The fourth collection includes *Super Android 13!*, in which Goku and comrades must take on a trio of murderous androids created for the sole purpose of killing our hero; while in *Bojack Unbound*, the events of the Cel

Saga lead to the release of alien soldier Bojack, who has an axe to grind with the top fighters of Earth! Collection Five sees the emergence of Broly, the legendary Super Saiyan whose powers might just be a match for Goku's, as they battle throughout the *Broly Trilogy* of movies! While Collection Six, last but not least, introduces us to a hitherto-unseen, but strangely familiar, character in *Fusion Reborn*, before capping off the releases with *Wrath of the Dragon*, the last *Dragon Ball Z* movie before 2013's *Battle of Gods*! If you're a *Dragon Ball* fan, then it looks like this next year could be a good one for your anime collection (but maybe a bad one for your wallet!).



ANIME LIMITED

DEATH PARADE Where 'Dead Drunk' Has Another Meaning...

The world between life and death is a little more plush than you might expect – a series of classy bars, with equally high-class bartenders. But these bartenders do more than just mix drinks – known as 'Arbiters', the job of these well-dressed beings is to judge the souls of the recently deceased. Those deemed worthy will be allowed to re-enter the cycle of reincarnation, while those whose souls are corrupt will be banished to the void for all eternity. In the Quindecim Bar, inhabited and run by the Arbiter Decim, pairs of humans who died together are forced to play twisted death games against one another. Not only does the ultra-competitive nature of the games reveal closely-guarded truths about the nature of the players' souls, but the supernatural power of the Arbiters means that even the most guarded of those unlucky players will end up spilling their secrets as the game continues... However, Decim's morbid unlfe is thrown into disarray when a newly dead spirit

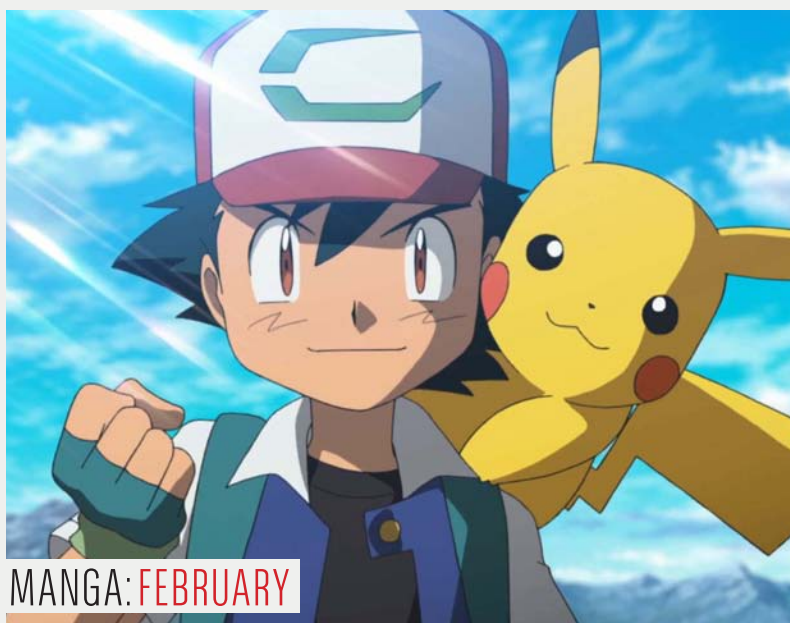
known only as 'The Black-Haired Woman' is introduced into the Quindecim Bar as an assistant. As a former human, The Black-Haired Woman has a different viewpoint on the ways in which Arbiters toy with the emotions and memories of the souls with which they are entrusted – but will her empathy and emotional connections be enough to change the actions of her emotionless Arbiter employer?

Death Parade began its life as a short film created by studio Madhouse for their 'Young Animator Training Project', an annual project sponsored by the Japanese government to support up-and-coming animators. The newly-released *Death Billiards* wowed audiences so much that Madhouse quickly commissioned a full series of the short, to fully delve into the dark world of the Arbiters and their judgements. And next year, viewers in the UK will be able to take their own trip to the Quindecim bar for this macabre psychological thriller!

POKEMON THE MOVIE – I CHOOSE YOU!

Still The Very Best?

It's hard to believe in some ways that *Pokémon* has just had its 20th anniversary, and in some ways, very easy – whether you're passionate about anime, videogames, manga, or all three, there's certainly no denying that *Pokémon* has transformed the face of popular culture even to this day. To commemorate the momentous milestone in the franchise's history, *Pokémon: I Choose You!* was released – a reworked origin story of Ash and Pikachu's first meeting, and their adventures beyond, *I Choose You!* serves as a jumping-on point for new and younger fans, while giving old hands a fresh retelling of the series' beginnings that works in newer elements from the world of *Pokémon*, such as some of the monsters from *Sun* and *Moon*, the latest duo of games. Released on DVD on 12 February, with a Steelbook Blu-ray edition coming soon after, it looks like *I Choose You!* will be a must-have for the collection of any Pokémaniac!



MANGA: FEBRUARY



THE TESTAMENT OF SISTER NEW DEVIL Sisters from Hell!

You'd think that Basara Tojo's home life was complex enough, with his father remarrying and his two new stepsisters coming to live with him. Of course, that's far too ordinary a scenario for this new series from Anime Limited, and so it naturally turns out that Mio and Maria – the stepsisters in question – are actually demons in disguise! Left alone with the pair of succubi when his father is called overseas on business, Basara still attempts to get along with his new family members, but when Mio uses her arcane abilities to attempt to form a demonic pact between the two of them, no end of harem hijinks ensue! Now magically forced into a dubious partnership with Mio, Basara's troubles only intensify as he has to protect his stepsister

from the Demon Lord – and live up to the name of the heroic warrior clan of which he is secretly a part.

Based on the long-running light novels and manga series of the same name by Tetsuto Uesu, *The Testament of Sister New Devil* combines fantasy action with lewd fanservice-filled comedy – as the pact between Basara and Mio pushes the pair into some difficult situations, and mischievous younger sister Maria doesn't help matters much either, doing everything in her considerable magical power to push the two together! Since its inception, the franchise has also released a sequel anime adaptation, as well as a pair of OVAs, so expect much more from these supernatural siblings!

MVM



PRINCESS PRINCIPAL

Tinker Tailor Princess Spy!

In an alternate history – although one not *too* dissimilar from our own – the country of Albion has become a major superpower through its indomitable fleet of airships, powered by the strange substance Cavorite. While Albion was prosperous at first, things soon turned sour, as the excesses of the ruling class led to a bloody and brutal rebellion, until finally a wall was built in the middle of London, separating the monarch-ruled Kingdom and the democratic Commonwealth. Years later, a plot is hatched by secret agents of the Commonwealth to train a doppelganger of the Kingdom's princess to assassinate her and take her place – until, that is, the *real* princess shows up, ready to make a deal! Willing to work with the Commonwealth in exchange for assistance ascending to the throne, Princess Charlotte, her would-be replacement Ange, and three other Commonwealth agents re-enter the Kingdom as spies!

JUNJO ROMANTICA

Summer of Love!

While they have veritable legions of fans throughout the world, it's rare to see 'boys' love' series receiving an international release – but all that's about to change with the loved-up debut of *Junjo Romantica* sometime next year! The series, which has already received three seasons in Japan, follows a trio of new relationships. In each of the romantic storylines, two young men meet, date, and fall in love – but the couples themselves couldn't be any more different! The majority of the series follows Misaki and Akihiko, whose relationship suddenly blossoms when Akihiko tutors Misaki for his university entrance exams – though for the emotionally tempestuous Misaki, it takes a while to admit his feelings! The series has already been confirmed for a Blu-ray release, and fans of the series probably shouldn't be surprised if the sequels end up coming out hot on its heels!



ANIME LIMITED

MANGA: APRIL



HELLO! KINMOZA

Multilingual Mayhem!

It's time for more linguistic levity with the return of *Kinmoza!* (short for Kin-Iro, or Golden Mosaic). In the first season of this cheerful and charming show, Shinobu, Aya, and Yoko were joined in their home country of Japan by Alice and Karen, two English transfer students that Shinobu got to know during her time abroad. Now firm friends, the quintet of high-schoolers continue to learn more about each other's culture and languages, while also getting

into the odd bit of light-hearted mischief! This sequel series, entitled *Hello! Kinmoza!* Is every bit as bright and bouncy as the episodes that have come before it, following the girls as they go on beach trips, try to get to know their seemingly terrifying new homeroom teacher, and try not to fail their final exams! The series is set to release next April, so fans of the previous season will definitely want this bright and breezy series to carry them into spring!



MANGA: FEBRUARY



DIGIMON ADVENTURE TRI 4

Try Tri Again!

Celebrating the 15th anniversary of the *Digimon* saga, the ongoing releases of *Digimon Adventure tri*, are a multi-movie story that revisits the original gang of Digidestined heroes and their partner Digimon, six years after their first inadvertent trip to the Digital World. While the first three movies – *Reunion*, *Determination*, and *Confession* – set the stage for this latest adventure, things really start to get interesting with the forebodingly-titled *Loss*. Beginning the second half, and the presumably thrilling climax of the series, *Loss* follows the Digidestined as they re-enter the perilous Digital World in an attempt to battle the mysterious new enemy that threatens both their home, and that of the Digimon! But with powerful foes besetting them from all sides, and their relationships with their partners strained from the stresses of this new situation, even the experienced Digidestined will have their work cut out for them if they want to remain the Digital Champions!

Having already seen a theatrical release in Japan last summer, it's clear that *Loss* was well received at the box office, having taken over 140 million yen (or about £940,000!) throughout its cinematic run, a high-point for the franchise's releases. UK fans will have to wait until this February for the fourth installment of the series, but if the audience reception in Japan is anything to go by, this should be an even more fun and frenetic installment of the series than we've ever seen before! Manga's release will also include the English-language dub of the movie, which heralds the return of many of the original voice actors whose iconic performances first introduced us to the Digidestined all those years ago! As yet, there's still no word on whether or not we'll see a release of the *Digimon Adventure tri* stage play adaptation, which ran in Tokyo last summer! However, with a DVD release in Japan happening this month, all you theatre fans will have to keep your fingers crossed...



ANIME LIMITED: Q1

EUREKA SEVEN: HI-EVOLUTION MOVIE 1

Eureka! They've Done It Again!

In the mid-2000s, one of the biggest cult smashes in anime was Bones' *Eureka Seven*, a high-flying tale of romance and robots set against a worldwide war for the fate of the planet. Blending an environmentally-themed story with gorgeous animation and an amazing soundtrack, the original series earned its title as a modern classic of the day. So it would seem that the only confusing thing about the release of this *Eureka Seven* movie trilogy is why they waited

so long! However, the first of the *Hi-Evolution* trilogy – which reboots and adds to the original series – brought the story of star-crossed (and skyfaring) lovers Renton and Eureka to a whole new audience when the movie was released this year in Japan, but if you're jealous that you won't get to see it on the big screen, fear not, as Anime Limited will be giving the movie a theatrical run in 2018!



ANIME LIMITED: Q1



GRIMGAR: ASHES AND ILLUSIONS

Not your usual fantasy...

At one time or another, we've probably all daydreamed about being transported into some kind of fantastical world, battling monsters and relieving them of their loot to earn our living. But for Haruhiro, the world of Grimgar that he suddenly finds himself is far from what he might have imagined it would be – if, that is, he could remember anything at all about his former life!

Awakening with a number of other amnesiacs in the fantasy land of Grimgar, Haruhiro and his new party of comrades and friends may not know where they came from originally, but they know it isn't here. And Grimgar isn't the type of place to pull any punches – with monsters and perils around every corner for a group of fledgling adventurers, Haruhiro and his friends soon find that even their new skills in swords and sorcery aren't enough to protect them from the trials and tragedy that awaits.

Originally known as *Grimgar of Fantasy and Ash*, but being released in the UK by Anime Limited as *Grimgar: Ashes and Illusions*, the series – based on the light novels by Ao Jumboji – has already earned itself a cult following of fantasy fans. And it's not difficult to see why – with its dark, almost realistic approach to the difficulties of navigating a world infested with monsters and imbued with magic, *Grimgar* definitely offers a fresh look at the fantasy genre staples we've come to know so well. While every RPG element that you might expect to see is present in *Grimgar*, they're certainly not as you know them – the opening episode of the series sees our heroes struggling to defeat a single goblin that fights them with the brutal animal instincts of a creature battling against a sudden and violent death. Hopefully, Haruhiro and his party can keep themselves going long enough throughout the series' dozen-episode run to discover the mysteries surrounding this world and their place in it!



MVM

MADE IN ABYSS Going Underground!

2018 is shaping up to be a great year for fantasy series as well! Another journey into a world of whimsy and wonder is *Made in Abyss*, a fantastical tale that blends a magical fantasy world with a steampunk twist or two. The series focuses on Riko, a wayward child whose mother, the famous adventurer Lyza, disappeared into a deep dark cave known only as the Abyss some years ago, never to return. The Abyss holds many secrets – most of which will remain so, as the cave holds a curse that prevents those who delve too deep from

ever returning... but that doesn't stop Riko from making a voyage of her own down into the dark, when she receives a message from her lost mother! As her journey into the Abyss begins, Riko happens across a robotic boy with no memories, whom she names Reg. Reg's amnesiac state gives him a quest of his own, and his robotic abilities (and superpowered energy beam) make him an excellent adventuring companion. With her new friend in tow, Riko sets out to discover the fate of her mother, as well as have the adventure of a lifetime!

MVM



GIRLS' LAST TOUR

Not your average family road trip...

Yuri and Chito do a lot of things that normal sisters do – they bicker with each other, make each other laugh, but they also help keep each other alive in the ruins of a post-apocalyptic world. Trundling around in their Kettenkrad – a kind of modified tank-motorcycle crossbreed – the girls somehow manage to eke out a living on what little food and supplies remain in their derelict city – a pretty amazing feat on its own, considering the uninhabited wasteland in which they live. It's not all doom and gloom however, as *Girls' Last Tour* actually looks like a surprisingly heartwarming story about two adorable sisters who just happen to have been born after the apocalypse. However, the cutesy art style which makes the series look so gentle despite its grey and snow-covered setting might just be a smokescreen for a dark and foreboding story – but viewers will have to wait until the series' release next year to find out for sure!

WOLF'S RAIN

A Wolf In Human's Clothing...

In a post-apocalyptic wasteland, nothing is as it seems... for instance, that brooding anime hero is actually a wolf in disguise! Though thought to have been made extinct from the ravaged landscape, the heroes of *Wolf's Rain*, a ragtag pack of wolves, are able to blend into what's left of human society through the use of illusory magic, making them appear to be nothing more than ordinary men and women. Kiba, the leader of the pack, is determined to bring wolfkind to the fabled Paradise, a legendary realm where his lupine brethren can be free from the hardships of the world of men. But the world in which they live is dangerous for both men and wolves alike, and finding the key to Paradise is easier said than done...

A poignant and atmospheric classic, *Wolf's Rain* is another one of the lucky series seeing a re-release next year, this time in a limited run of Blu-ray collector's editions, so snap it up when you can!



ANIME LIMITED

ANIME LIMITED



LUPIN III PART IV

Robs from the rich, and gives to himself!

The man with the best sideburns in all of anime is back to take everything that isn't nailed down, as *Lupin III* returns for its first animated series in over 30 years! This time sporting a natty blue jacket, Arsene Lupin, the world's greatest thief, travels Italy in search of adventure and more riches than he could possibly spend. With his accomplices in tow – the femme fatale Fujiko, the gun-toting Jigen, and stoic samurai Goemon – Lupin and crew somehow

always manage to stay one step ahead of the endlessly dedicated Inspector Zenigata, no matter how flamboyantly elaborate their heists become! This latest incarnation of the series has definitely introduced a whole new generation of viewers to Lupin's escapades, while simultaneously tickling the nostalgia bone of hordes of classic anime fans with its fast-paced stories of derring-do, comedy, and crime!

NEO'S TOPTEN

Our roundup of the hottest tracks currently
blasting on the office stereo

WORDS BY TOM SMITH

1 HOTEI – AMPLIFIRE 18 OCTOBER

With over 40 million records under his belt, and known internationally for his song *Battle Without Honor or Humanity* from *Kill Bill* (and since used in every other movie action scene, ever), guitar legend Tomoyasu Hotei is set to mark his return with another album and London live date.

Already out by the time this issue hits the shelves will be Hotei's latest album *Paradox*, featuring 11 songs written in London, where the guitarist now lives. We've chosen *Amplifire* for our favourite song this month (and it has a funky lyric video on YouTube too), but it was a close call between this and album track *London Bridge*, which features nods to Oasis, The Beatles, classic nursery rhymes, and traditional Japanese melodies amongst other things.

Hotei will also be returning to the live stage in October of 2018 with a show booked in at Shepherd's Bush Empire on 18 October. Tickets are on sale now. Regular tickets are priced between £31.95 and £37.60, while VIP tickets get you the best seats in the house and allow you to meet the star for the price of £85.40. Only three seats for the latter remain at the time of writing, so better act fast!

Previous album *STRANGERS* saw Hotei record songs with a number of international rock stars, including Iggy Pop and Richard Z. Kruspe of Germany's Rammstein. In 2016 Hotei celebrated his 35th anniversary with a 57 show tour, culminating with his 40th headline show at Tokyo's Budokan arena, followed by his first headline European tour the following year.

NEW LONDON DATE!



FESTIVAL DATE!



2 BABYMETAL – KARATE 8-10 JUNE

The first wave of acts have been announced for 2018's Download Festival at Leicestershire's Donington Park, and Babymetal are among them! The metal fest will be taking place between 8-10 June, with headliners Avenged Sevenfold, Guns N' Roses and Ozzy Osbourne already revealed.

By the time of the appearance Babymetal's second album *Metal Resistance* will be just over two years old – the perfect time to drop new material if you ask us!

Speaking of new material, it was revealed at San Diego Comic-Con that Babymetal will be providing the theme song to Cartoon Network's upcoming series *Unikitty*, a character introduced in 2014's *The Lego Movie*. This follows on nearly a year from Warner Bros. Animation revealing that the trio would embark in their own animated adventure, further details of which have yet to arise.

Tickets for Download 2018 are now on sale from the festival's homepage.

NEW MINI-ALBUM!



3 DOLL\$BOXX – SUB-LIMINAL 19 JANUARY

The eagle-eyed among you may have noticed this one cropping up in the NEO Top Ten before! The official UK release has now slipped back to 19 January for DOLL\$BOXX's first piece of new music in five-years. Entitled *high Spec*, the five-track mini-album sees the band return with their most ferocious material to date. Consisting of members from cheery J-pop / rock loony squad Gacharic Spin and vocalist Fuki, the band has previously been tipped as the original "kawaii metal" group when Babymetal were being hyped up by the media.

Every track from the CD has been turned into a music video, with the full length versions of each now available to watch on YouTube. Office favourite is *Sub-liminal*, and sees the girls draped in red cloth designed by n.NAOTO (who has also been responsible for outfit designs for Marilyn Manson, X Japan and Amy Lee). The EP cover is pretty cool too, featuring brush art by illustrator Masayuki Kojo.

J-POP COVER ALBUM!



4 FEMM – MY REVOLUTION 19 JANUARY

Sentient mannequins FEMM will release their cover album *80s/90s J-POP REVIVAL* in the UK on CD and mega limited cassette from 19 January courtesy of JPU Records. Songs from popular TV series, films and commercials that penetrated a generation and influenced Japanese pop-culture have been included, each reimagined in FEMM's feisty, electronic style. These include hits originally from pioneers such as TM NETWORK, Kome Kome Club, the brilliant green and many other heroes of J-pop.

This special cover album is to keep fans happy as the duo make preparations for their long awaited, feisty comeback album.

5 VAMPS – RISE OR DIE

The first of several bad news stories to rock the J-pop world this month is the revelation that VAMPS will be ceasing all activities.

"Our engines have overheated and we need some time to cool down," a post on their official Facebook page reads.

"As soon as we are at our best temperature and the time is right for our return, we plan to kick back into action in top gear! We'll be counting on your fiery welcome!"

Track *Rise of Die*, from latest album *Underworld*, also features Richard Z. Kruspe from Rammstein on it. Is this the end of the band, or should we expect them to pick back up where they left off at some point down the line? Only time will tell!

NEW SINGLE!



6 THE MICRO HEAD 4N'S – JOUGEN NO TSUKI NO ORCHESTRA: STELLA NOTE MAGIC OUT NOW!

Rockers THE MICRO HEAD 4N'S join Gan Shin Records for the release of latest single *Jougen No Tsuki No Orchestra: Stella Note Magic*, out now digitally across Europe.

The band features former members of D'espairsRay and FantasticCrisis, as well as the vocalist of A (not to be confused with the British band of the same name from the turn of the millennium).

7 NAMIE AMURO – STRIKE A POSE

Ironically, Namie Amuro's latest album *Finally* has yet to be released here, but back home in Japan it's sold almost 1.6 million copies,

making it Japan's biggest selling record this decade! Just as well, really, as the megastar has announced that she will retire on 16 September 2018. That date is 25 years since the release of her first single as part of the group SUPER MONKEYS in 1992. On her retirement, Amuro comments, "I plan to make the last year of my music career meaningful by focusing my full attention on creating a final album and performing at concerts".

DISBANDING!



8 CHATMONCHY – DAIDAI

J-pop twosome Chatmonchy have announced that the band will end in July 2018, but it seems the *Bleach* theme singers may still continue under different guises. A statement released on their website reads "While thinking about what to do after this year's nationwide tour, we began to think that we would be able to go to a new place if we stripped ourselves of the Chatmonchy name".

9 THE IDOL FORMERLY KNOWN AS LADYBABY – GENERATION HARD KNOCKS

Another hiatus in the world of J-pop comes from camp LADYBABY! Youngest member Rei Kuromiya has announced that she will leave the unit, citing a throat condition, but also going on to state that she didn't enjoy being an idol. Remaining member Rie states that she doesn't know what to do next, but she doesn't want to destroy everything she spent so long building up.

HIATUS!



UK TOUR!



10 ESPRIT D'AIR – STARSTORM 5-11 FEBRUARY

The rock trio are readying themselves for their biggest tour to date, featuring seven shows across the UK. The dates include headline gigs in London, Cardiff, Birmingham, Manchester, Newcastle, Carlisle and Glasgow and is in celebration of comeback album *Constellations*.

The album is out now on CD and digital formats from their own label, Starstorm Records – named after this song!

THE GODFATHER OF TOKYO

JONATHAN CLEMENTS ON LOVING THE JOB YOU DO

“So the Madhouse studio was in debt,” says Masao Murayama, “and there was this big buy-out. I was happy to sell it on to someone else, and then I thought: now what am I going to do? I put people together. We make things that we love. Am I going to stop?”

Which is why, at the age when most Japanese workers are long-retired, Murayama found himself setting up Mappa, the Murayama Animation Produce Project Association, which soon established its credentials with the critical smash of *Kids on the Slope*. But even then, Murayama bowed out in 2016, as the studio unleashed *In This Corner of the World* and *Yuri on Ice*.

Did he retire? Hell, no. “People like me and Hayao Miyazaki,” he said, “we’re all born in 1941. We were there for the beginnings of anime as we know it. We don’t know when to quit. We don’t know what we would do if we *did* quit!” And so he founded his newest start-up, the studio M2, at the age of 75.

“This is probably my last,” he says, with a twinkle in his eye. “Or is it?”

He is wearing an *Astro Boy* sweatshirt that recalls his first-ever job, but is remembering a figure from much later in his career.

“PEOPLE LIKE ME AND HAYAO MIYAZAKI, WE’RE ALL BORN IN 1941. WE WERE THERE FOR THE BEGINNINGS OF ANIME AS WE KNOW IT. WE DON’T KNOW WHEN TO QUIT. WE DON’T KNOW WHAT WE WOULD DO IF WE *DID* QUIT!”

“I said to Satoshi Kon: I like you. I like your work. There’s greatness in you, but the mainstream just can’t see it. We just don’t get the box office on your films. We did horror with *Perfect Blue*, we did film history with *Millennium Actress*. So maybe let’s do something *entertaining*.”

“And he says: ‘I want to do a thing about three tramps who find an abandoned baby.’”

The result was *Tokyo Godfathers*, anime’s good-natured, sardonic Christmas movie, in which a founding child inadvertently propels the cast into a series of increasingly unlikely coincidences that fix their issues, solve their lives, and reunite them with their estranged families. The message, arguably, was universal, but the medium was incredibly, well, Christmassy, unleashed on a Japanese population with barely 1% believers.



1. A universal message wrapped up in an anime bow. 2. Masao Murayama, an anime pioneer who refuses to retire!

“Yeah,” Murayama says with a sigh. “Nobody came to see that one, either.”

He looks out over the packed cinema at the Edinburgh Filmhouse, and raises a quizzical eyebrow. “What did you think?” The crowd bursts into raucous applause for his 14-year-old movie.

This frail old man, so shaky that my heart’s in my mouth every time I have to watch him climb some steps, beams with pure joy. ●

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JANUARY 26TH 2018

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TOEI ANIMATION





//COMING UP THE BATTLESHIP ISLAND

OUT: 22 JANUARY // DISTRIBUTOR: PRECISION PICTURES

Ryu Seung-wan's World War II movie casts Hwang Jung-min and Kim Su-an, the little girl from *Train To Busan*, as a father and daughter sent to Hashima Island as forced labour for the Japanese. There, despite the appalling conditions and cruelty of their captors, they become involved in a daring escape plot. *The Battleship Island* broke the record for box office admissions on opening day in South Korea, although the subject matter has provoked criticism from some right-wing Japanese commentators.

Splatoon 2

9/10 METRO
"one of the best
online shooters
ever made"

"one of Nintendo's
finest games
in years"

9/10 Nintendo
Insider
"an unbeatable
multiplayer
experience"



10/10 NintendoLife
"continues Nintendo's
trailblazing first year
of Switch stunners"

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MANGA SCHOOL with Leeann Hamilton

MY RESOLUTION: GOOD ART PRACTICE FOR 2018

OUR GUIDE TO IMPROVING YOUR ART IN THE NEW YEAR – AND BEYOND!

WAHEY! YOU’VE RUNG in 2018 with a renewed sense of hope and motivation! Especially if you’re starting afresh with creating art, and picking up the pace again. “I’m going to do my best!” “I’m going to make this portfolio!”

But you’re also worried about *those* kind of resolutions: the ones where you give them up the moment you make them. Doubt is a mind-killer when you’re keen on making art for a living, so why stick to resolutions when you’re not confident enough in keeping them?

First thing’s first: don’t turn your personal practice into resolutions! Artists start and evolve at different times and speeds, and the New Year isn’t necessarily the best starting block. And, more importantly: *artistic improvement is NOT a contest, and there is NO failure in giving art a break.* Instead, I want to provide guidance during those times of doubts you might experience, because we are all here to help each other.

I’m going to look into frequent worries, from the easiest to answer into the hardest. For the sake of transparency, you are cordially invited to look at the messes I make in my own sketchbooks!

“WHAT IF I RUIN MY NEW SKETCHBOOK WITH A BAD DRAWING ON THE FIRST PAGE?”

Skip the first two pages, and draw on the third. The first few blank pages also deter anyone who wants to nosy through your sketches without asking! And if you want to draw on them later, fire away.

“NONE OF MY DRAWINGS TURN OUT GREAT.”

Secret: NONE of our drawings all turn out great! Also another secret: if you want to keep track of your artistic process, DON’T chuck your work into the bin where it’s permanently disposed of, *please*.

To quote the fantastic animation director Chuck Jones:

“Every artist has thousands of bad drawings in them and the only way to get rid of them is to draw them out.”

Most importantly, enjoy making inaccurate sketches, and people don’t have to see them either. Never sweat the first draft, and definitely make more than one drawing of the thing you want to draw. (We’re not all Kim Jung Gi.)

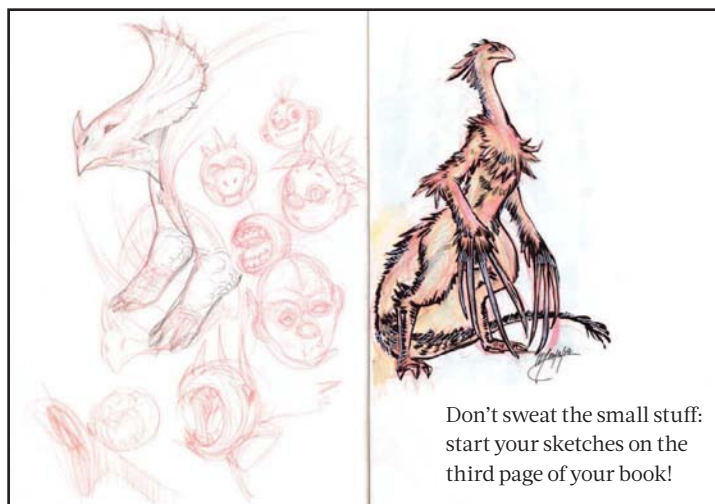
“(PEOPLE SAY THAT) USING REFERENCE IS CHEATING.”

Whoooooops! Using reference to be able to draw something accurately is not only being done by professional artists as we speak, but also because it’s *common sense*. To draw something accurately needs an image AND the practice putting it into a drawing, see?

Expecting an artist to have perfect photographic memory of *every single thing EVER* is a notion best reserved for Not-Artists with Always Something Critical to Say about Actual Artists, only because we can laugh at them. (Again: we’re not all Kim Jung Gi.)

“I’M FEELING ART BLOCK A LOT MORE. WHEN I WAS YOUNGER, I USED TO BE ABLE TO DRAW ANYTHING I WANTED, NOW I CAN’T.”

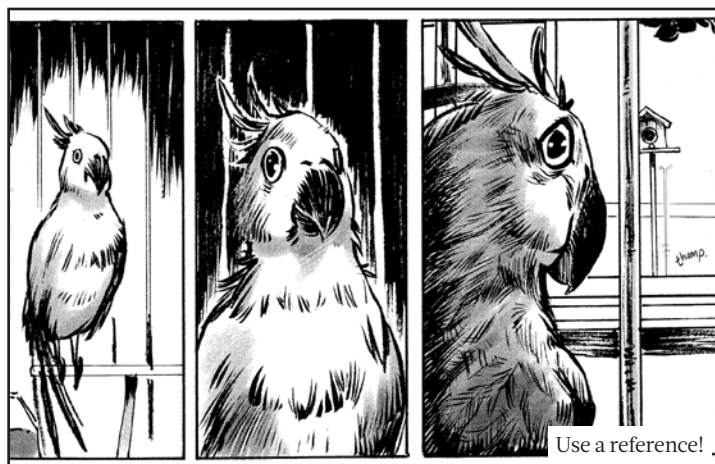
It’s perfectly normal to feel ‘artist’s block’ – that familiar stressful moment where you can’t seem to put your pencil to paper. But stressing out over the lack of motivation is going to stress you out more! Easier said than done to say



Don’t sweat the small stuff: start your sketches on the third page of your book!



Not every drawing needs to be your best.



Use a reference!



'well then, don't stress!', because you might as well ask grass to turn from green to pink, if it just tried hard enough. (Spoiler: grass doesn't try, it just is.)

Feeling enthusiasm for art as a kid (getting art boxes, messing with paint and crayons, drawing characters from your favourite shows) isn't quite the same as feeling motivation for art as an adult (studying art theory, preparing a portfolio for college, working on assignments / commissions to pay rent).

Rather than pushing yourself to draw because you feel the need to, just dip into the emotion you felt when you first came up with the idea. And I'll reinstate; it doesn't have to be an accurate or 'good' drawing. It's a rough concept for later. Step back, and have a cup of tea, or have a break from art until you feel better. You're drawing for yourself.

"MY ART TEACHER SAID I SHOULDN'T BE DRAWING MANGA STYLE."

I told you I'd be listing this from easiest to hardest, and as a reader of NEO magazine, you might be feeling a sense of sacrilege to the medium.

Like much of the anime and manga we might have consumed over the years, many things will get lost in translation. Imitating the art style of our favourite Japanese works is a very popular pastime among younger artists. However the advice given to them by stricter art teachers is quite brutal to their ego – which is already clouding over their work – even though that is *not* the original intent of the teacher. What is being lost in translation here?

'Don't use manga style as a crutch for fundamental skills'. Making that 20-volume, 3200 page magical girl epic is a sweet fantasy, especially when you have the characters and profiles already committed to paper. But when the young artist sits down to actually draw the pages, it might dawn on them that their work could be open to scrutiny from outside viewers. Do they understand how to draw a comic / manga page? Are the panels in a logical order? Are they drawn left to right for English speaking audiences, or do they have to keep reminding outside readers (to their frustration) to read right to left, like their favourite Japanese stories? Are there too many details in the art, or none at all? What about drawing backgrounds, or human figures, or objects, or things in action?

There is a LOT to juggle here, but there's still so much to learn! If you deliberately omit the skills to be able to draw a convincing story, because of an art teacher hurting your ego with one misconstrued suggestion, the structure is going to wobble dangerously.

To make your art truly sing, you'll need to embrace the lessons that polish your skills. Drawing objects, rendering light, picking the right colours... or drawing a hand that holds a weapon convincingly. And every month, NEO prints a new art tutorial to break a mysterious process down into edible chunks. There is no end to learning about your craft. Despite everything you will deal with, we'll always be here to help and guide you on the way. Happy New Year!

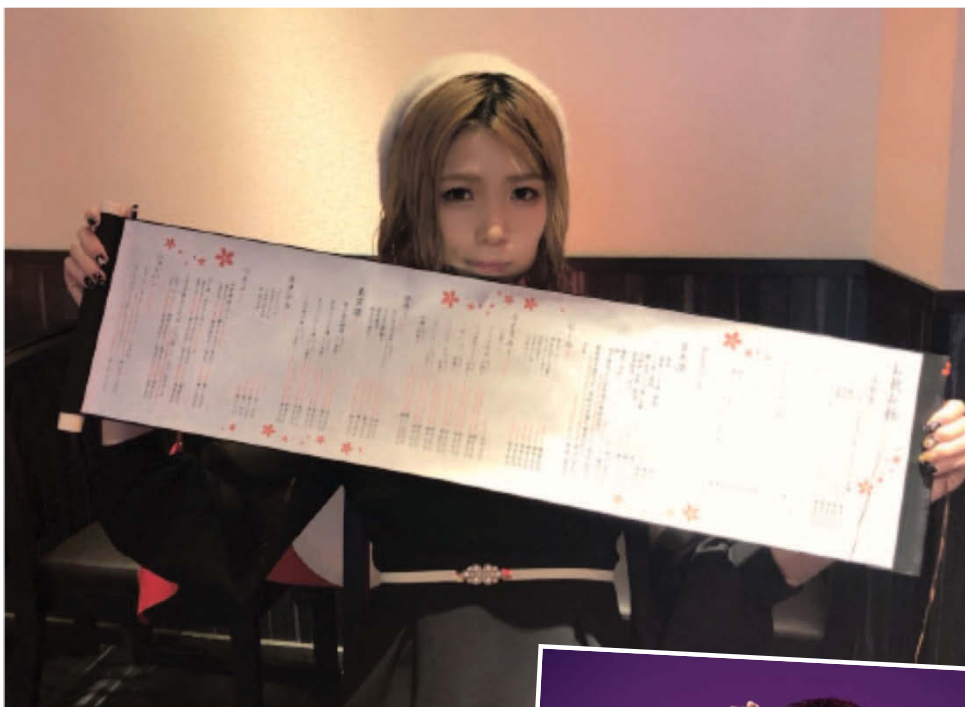


CHAMELEON PENS

Chameleon Color Tones is an innovative marker system, where a single marker allows you to achieve multiple tones. Initially launching the highly acclaimed Deluxe Set, a pack of 20 markers allowing you to get over 100 tones, and the new palette of 30 new colours (50 in total) will leave artists with near endless possibilities.

Visit www.chameleonpens.com for more information about the range!





NINJA CAFE!

J-POP IDOL MAHIRU KURUMIZAWA EATS LIKE AN ASSASSIN AT TOKYO'S KUNOICHI CAFE

WE HAVE A traditional job in Japan known as “ninja” that was prevalent in feudal times, and fantasied about in films, video games and anime ever since. Some places in Japan are particularly famous for ninja, such as Iga (some claim the birth place of the ninja and ninjutsu!) and Saga (it has a ninja village where you can become a ninja for the day!). I think every Japanese person knows a little story or a fact about ninjas.

Between Shibuya and Ebisu is a cafe where you can experience real-life ninja. It's called Kunoichi Cafe, and here you can meet Kunoichi (the term for female ninja).

The establishment is owned by a professional Kunoichi, who grew up and trained in the way of the Kunoichi since she was two years old. The staff here are also training to be Kunoichi.

The menu here is found on a vertical hanging scroll! I was so surprised and excited to see it, so I had to take a picture! It's huuuge (see the top right of this page!).

To be served you have to bang a drum to summon Kunoichi, who'll then say the equivalent of “yes, I'm coming!” in Japanese.

We tried four dishes; raw egg on rice with eel for 1200 yen (about £8, and don't worry, raw eggs and even chicken is safe to eat in Japan!), Nikujaga for 900 yen (£6, this is a traditional home cooked meal with meat and potatoes), a healthy tofu salad (also 900 yen) and cherry blossom baumkuchen for dessert that cost 1300 yen (around £8.70). All foods are so Instagramable!

Every day they change the foods involved in their lunch-time set menu; it's very popular, so expect it to sell out fast if you go here! We were unable to eat it this time.

They have a Japanese flooring room that uses traditional tatami. In this room you can take a picture with staff, along with tapestry written with kanji on the walls and lots of sticks Kunoichi would use to fight against enemies with.

Staff can even teach you how to use a throwing knife or sword in the Kunoichi style! If you visit Japan, you should step inside and experience unique Kunoichi culture!

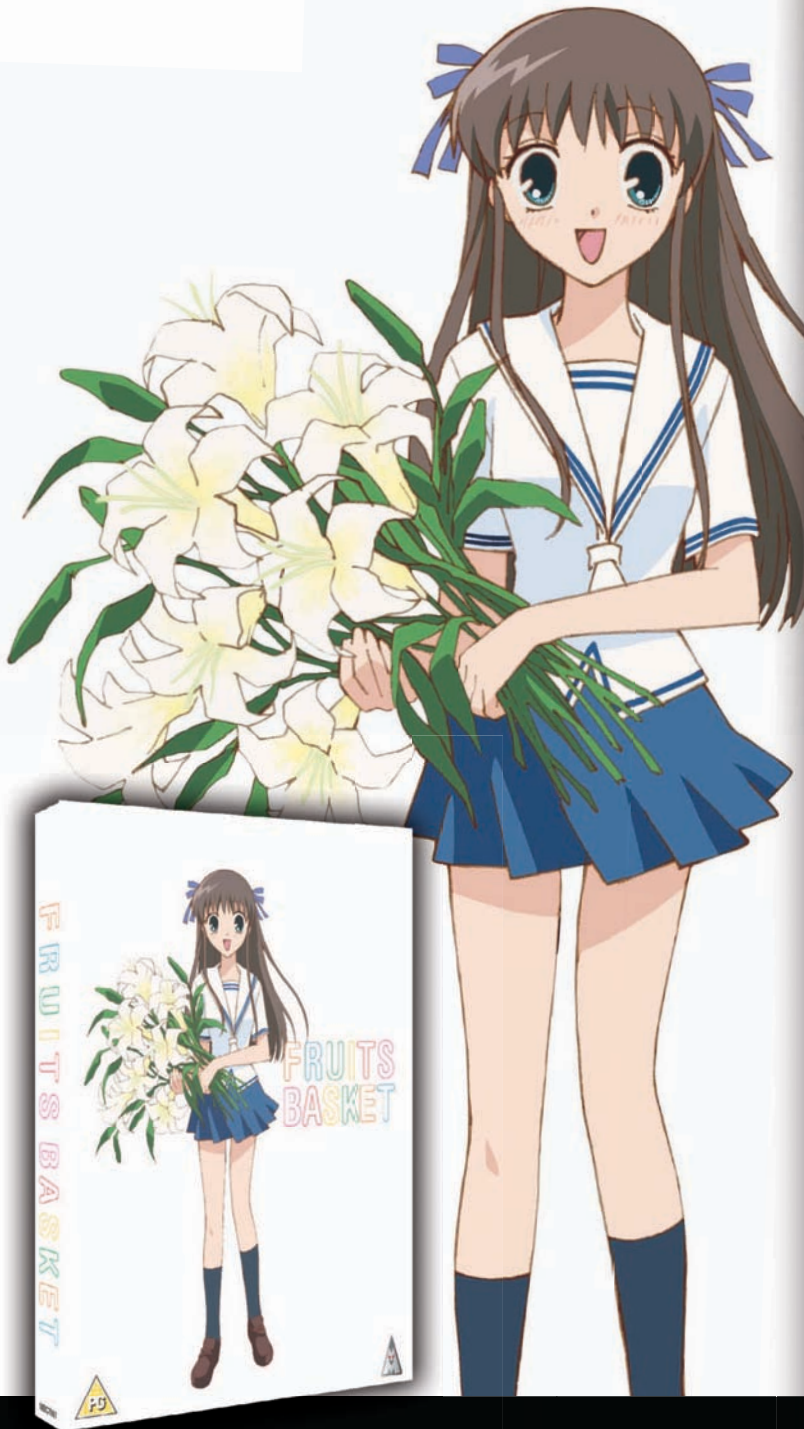
Mahiru Kurumizawa is part of Japan's idol group Moso Calibration whose music is available in the UK via JPU Records. You can follow her on Twitter (@lunch_mahiru) and Instagram (@mahiru104). ●



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WORDS BY DAVID WEST



SEVEN DEADLY SINS

Time To Get The Gang Back Together

THE KINGDOM OF Liones in Britannia is in dire peril. The Holy Knights, who are supposed to be the land's sworn protectors, have fallen into corruption and now serve only their own worst instincts, oppressing the people and trying to lead the nation into a destructive holy war. However, the greatest knights in all Britannia were the Seven Deadly Sins but, after being falsely accused of treason, they've disappeared. Determined to save her country from the tide of turmoil, Princess Elizabeth sneaks out of the royal castle to track down the once-famed Sins warriors. But the first one she finds is Meliodas, who works in a tavern and is a lowly pig-keeper.

The Seven Deadly Sins started life as a manga series by Nabaka Suzuki that was adapted into an anime series. Now it's making the transition to a video game from Bandai Namco and developer Natsumi Atari, whose credits include *Godzilla VS* on the PS4 and entries in the *Gundam* and *Rurouni Kenshin* franchises. *The Seven Deadly Sins* game takes the form of an action title in which players explore the world of Britannia to gather the seven warriors and defeat the Holy Knights. In addition to the main Adventure Mode the game will include Duel Mode which allows player vs player battles in both 1vs1 and 2vs2 configurations. *The Seven Deadly Sins: Knights Of Britannia* will be out for the PlayStation 4 on 9 February from Bandai Namco Entertainment, and the anime series is streaming now on Netflix.



PSYCHOKINESIS

Netflix Embraces Korean Cinema

In 2016 Yeon Sang-Ho's *Train To Busan* threw a brilliant and thrilling spin on the zombie movie. His follow-up, *Psychokinesis*, has been snapped up by Netflix for a 2018 release. Details are fairly scarce at this point – the story concerns a man who unexpectedly acquires superpowers – but the cast includes Ryu Seung-ryong and Shim Eun-kyung, who were voice actors on Yeon's zombie-tastic animated feature *Seoul Station*, the prequel to *Train To Busan*. It's one of a growing number of Korean productions coming to Netflix in 2018. *The Chase* is a thriller about a cop hunting the serial killer who got away 30 years ago. *Steel Rain* sees the leader of North Korea flee to the South following a coup. *Forgotten* is a mystery starring two brothers, one of whom disappears for 19 days only to return with no memory of where he's been.

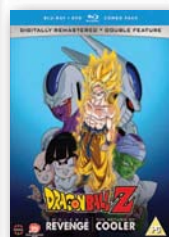
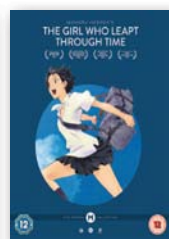
THE CONDOR HEROES ARE COMING

Only Had To Wait 60 Years

Legends Of The Condor Heroes, the epic Chinese martial arts fantasy written by Jin Yong, aka Louis Cha, started as a serial in a Hong Kong newspaper in 1957. Since then it has been adapted for the screen multiple times – first by Hu Peng in 1958 with Cao Dahua, while other notable versions include Chang Cheh's *The Brave Archer* starring Fu Sheng, Jeff Lau's *The Eagle Shooting Heroes* and several Hong Kong and Chinese TV series. Now Jin Yong's original work is being translated by Anna Holmwood, and *A Hero Born*, the first of a planned 12 volumes, will be published in February 2018 by MacLehose Press.



UK release schedule



ANIME

DATE	TITLE	DISTRIBUTOR
26/12	Digimon Adventure tri the Movie Part 3	Manga
26/12	Transformers the Movie	Manga
26/12	Dragon Ball Z Movie Collection 3	Manga
26/12	Hosoda Collection: The Girl Who Leapt Through Time	Manga
08/01	Mobile Suit Gundam ZZ Part 2	Anime Limited
08/01	Fruits Basket [Collector's Blu-ray]	MVM
15/01	Hosoda Collection: Summer Wars	Manga
15/01	Dragon Ball Z Movie Collection 4	Manga
15/01	Matoi The Sacred Slayer [DVD / Blu-ray]	MVM
22/01	Monster Musume [Collector's Combi]	MVM
29/01	Dragon Ball Super 1:2	Manga
05/02	My Entire High School Sinking Into The Sea	Manga
05/02	Tenchi Muyo OVA [DVD / Blu-ray]	MVM
12/02	Pokémon The Movie: I Choose You!	Manga
12/02	Dragon Ball Z Movie Collection 5	Manga
12/02	Skip Beat Collection [DVD / Blu-ray]	MVM
19/02	Gate [Collector's Combi]	MVM
26/02	Naruto Shippuden Box 31	Manga
05/03	Initial D Legend 1: Awakening [DVD / Blu-ray]	MVM
12/03	Dragon Ball Z Movie Collection 6	Manga
12/03	Log Horizon S1 Collection	MVM
12/03	Log Horizon S2 Collection	MVM
19/03	Familiar of Zero Complete Collection [Blu-ray]	MVM



MANGA

DATE	TITLE	DISTRIBUTOR
21/12	Maga-tsuki 9	Kodansha
21/12	Say I Love You 18	Kodansha

DATE	TITLE	DISTRIBUTOR
21/12	Attack on Titan 23	Kodansha
21/12	Happiness 6	Kodansha
21/12	Inuyashiki 10	Kodansha
21/12	FLYING WITCH 4	Vertical
21/12	NGE: The Shinji Ikari Raising Project V5	Dark Horse
21/12	Seraph of the End 4	Vertical
28/12	Dragonball Super 2	VIZ Media
28/12	Food Wars 21	VIZ Media
28/12	Attack on Titan: Before the Fall 12	Kodansha
28/12	Attack on Titan: Junior High 5	Kodansha
28/12	Love And Lies 3	Kodansha
28/12	That Time I Got Reincarnated as a Slime 3	Kodansha
28/12	Land Of The Lustrous 4	Kodansha
28/12	Witchcraft Works Volume 10	Vertical
11/01	Bloody Mary 9	VIZ Media
11/01	Don't Be Cruel 6	VIZ Media
11/01	Everyone's Getting Married 7	VIZ Media
11/01	Finder 4 - In Captivity	VIZ Media
11/01	Golden Kamuy 3	VIZ Media
11/01	Queen's Quality 2	VIZ Media
11/01	Splatoon 1	VIZ Media
11/01	Sweet Blue Flowers 2	VIZ Media
11/01	Yona of the Dawn 09	VIZ Media
25/01	7th Garden 7	VIZ Media
25/01	The Art of Magic: The Gathering - Ixalan	VIZ Media
25/01	Blue Exorcist 18	VIZ Media
25/01	Haikyuu!! 19	VIZ Media
25/01	Naruto 3-in-1 Edition 21	VIZ Media
25/01	Naruto: Chibi Sasuke's Sharingan Legend 2	VIZ Media
25/01	Nisekoi 25	VIZ Media



ASIAN FILM

DATE	TITLE	DISTRIBUTOR
26/12	Casino Tycoon	88 Films
08/01	Seijun Suzuki: The Early Years Vol. 1	Arrow Video
15/01	New World	Montage Pictures
22/01	The Battleship Island	Precision Pictures
22/01	Chasing The Dragon	Kaleidoscope Home Entertainment
22/01	One-Armed Swordsman	88 Films
29/01	After The Storm	Arrow Academy
29/01	Family Values: Three Films by Hirozaku Kore-eda	Arrow Academy
29/01	Monster Hunt	Manga Entertainment
29/01	Three Films By Jia Zhangke	Arrow Academy
29/01	Wolf Warriors	Cine Asia
05/12	The Shanghai Job	Signature Entertainment
12/02	Brotherhood Of Blades II: The Infernal Battleground	Thunderbird Releasing
12/02	House	Eureka
12/02	The Legend Of Wukong	Cine Asia
19/02	The Final Master	Cine Asia
19/02	The Housemaid	Montage Pictures

WE LOVE THIS STUFF!

Check out NEO's pick of the coolest merchandise around this month



1

1. SLEEPING FOX HAIR CLIP

Adorn your barnet with this sleeping woodland friend, £12.50 from fab retro company www.now-voyager.co.uk.

2. BERRY TART CAKE FASCINATOR

Cupcakes are a girl's best friend, and it's never been easier to wear one on your head than with this sweet little clip, £18.50 from www.now-voyager.co.uk.



2

3. GENKI GEAR JANUARY SALE

On 22 December, Genki Gear will be launching their incredible Christmas sale, which will include these great designs being reduced to under £10 - there will even be some existing sale designs reduced to under £5! Head to GenkiGear.co.uk!

4. BANANYA PLUSH

Available now for £12 from TokyoToys.com are these adorable little plushies!

5. DRAGOBORNE TRIAL DECK VOL. 4 - REAPER'S GIFT

Dragoborne returns with a fourth trial deck that will engage you in more ways than one... The reaper will come for your creatures often in this deck, but it also bears gifts, allowing you to send your creatures into the fray with the knowledge that all's well that ends well. RRP £17.99: check www.findyourgamestore.co.uk to find your local stockist.



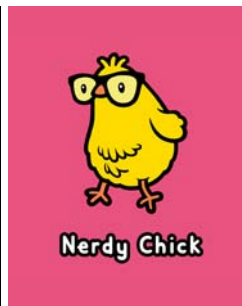
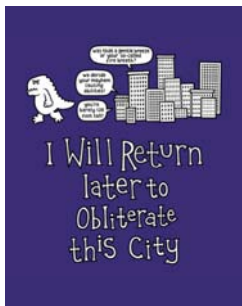
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5



3



6

6. RE:ZERO FIGURES

Ram and Ren from *Re:Zero* available at TokyoToys.com and in store from £56.



eeek!

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FUKUBUKURO

Adam Miller opens up some awesome mystery bags that are only sold on one day of the year!

FUKUBUKURO ARE SYNONYMOUS with the January sales here in Japan – a simple marketing trick that started over a century ago, but has now saturated almost every aspect of the retail market... but what are they?

I'm glad you asked, intrepid reader, as today I'm going to give you a full run down of these awesome treats!

WHAT ARE FUKUBUKURO?

The kanji for fukubukuro goes a long way to describing what they are: 福袋. The first kanji “fuku” means good fortune, and the second (in this case read as), “bukuro” means bag, so it has the rather clumsy English translation of “lucky bag.”

So with the semantics out the way, let's delve inside these mysterious bags! Almost every kind of shop sells these on 1 January, sometimes with a tiered pricing system, with the more expensive bags being filled with more exclusive items. Customers are given a rough idea of what is inside, they buy whichever bag feels right to them, then open them up to find out what treasures are inside.

Stock is very limited and once the bags are gone, you'll have to wait until next New Year to get your fix. The more savvy shoppers can reserve their bags in advance, and some people even have them delivered to avoid the insane crowds on 1 January. The combined original prices of the items inside always comfortably exceed the price tag, but they might be last year's fashions, an

earlier model or an item that just didn't sell that well. It's a great way for shops to clear their shelves, and for consumers to get items they might well love, but would otherwise never have bought.

THE HISTORY

The first fukubukuro was said to have been sold towards the end of the Meiji Period at Matsuya Department store in Ginza, Tokyo. The store is notoriously expensive, and the fukubukuro were an affordable way for common cretins like myself to enjoy the finer things in life. It also helped Matsuya shift literal bags full of stock that wasn't selling, and whilst a 90% discount tag may seem too uncouth for the elite demographic who shopped there a century ago, these charming little bags could be enjoyed by all without having the reputation of Matsuya sullied with a mere sale. The campaign was insanely popular from the get go and was soon replicated nationwide.

WHAT YOU CAN BUY?

Practically every shop in a mall sells some kind of fukubukuro, so no matter what you are interested in, there will be something for you. This year my wife is eyeing up a mystery camping set with a hefty £330 price tag (but is supposedly worth double that!). I always buy a £50 bag from the same clothing shop every year; I generally hate shopping and wear clothes until they are mere tatters on my back, so having someone basically choose my winter wardrobe for me is amazing. Apple are said to provide bags that could house a new MacBook or iPad, or just a bunch of dongles if you're unlucky, whilst the manga and novelty shop, Village Vanguard, have items ranging from a cosy blanket to poop-shaped candy.

HIT OR MISS

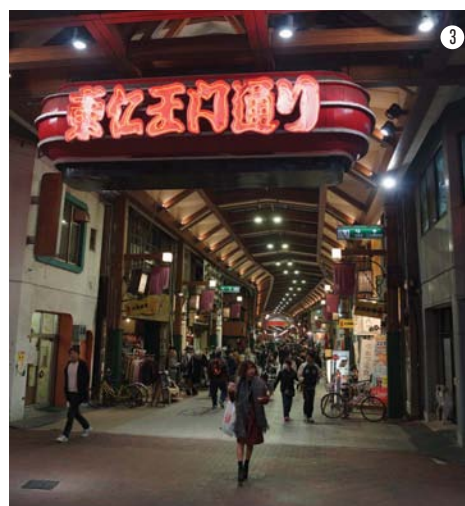
In short, I love fukubukuro and I am far from being alone in singing their praises. The idea basically allows someone to be adventurous for you, and impulse buys you would otherwise ignore or resist are now in your possession for better or worse. Whilst you may well end up with something so vile it isn't even fit for the landfill, chances are you'll get something awesome that would, in any other circumstances, not be in your life! ●

“THE FIRST KANJI “FUKU” MEANS GOOD FORTUNE, AND THE SECOND (IN THIS CASE READ AS), “BUKURO” MEANS BAG, SO IT HAS THE RATHER CLUMSY ENGLISH TRANSLATION OF “LUCKY BAG.””



MANGA OF THE MONTH

Christmas is a time of giving, and although the trifecta of record breaking earthquake, devastating tsunami, and terrifying nuclear power plant disaster was nearly seven years ago, the surrounding area is still very much recovering. The kind folks over at Big Ugly Robot have a collective work called *Aftershock* to help raise much-needed money. It includes short pieces from over 35 contributors, each describing why Japan is so special to them. Check out www.biguglyrobot.storenvy.com for their full library and to find out more.



1. A much younger me buying a fukubukuro of second-hand clothes (lots of duds that time around!). 2. You can buy your fukubukuro from the upmarket department stores that line central Nagoya. 3. For cheaper and more eccentric bags, you can hit up Japan's sprawling markets, like Osu Kannon in Nagoya. 4 & 5. There will be plenty of lucky bags on sale in Tokyo's Shibuya district too!





SANTA AND FRIENDS NAGOYA: GIVING TO THOSE WHO NEED IT MOST

THE HOLIDAY SEASON is a time of giving, and whilst traditional charity organizations are rather rare in Japan, Santa and Friends Nagoya strive to bring a little joy to as many orphans in the Nagoya area as possible. Adam Miller caught up with James Hedden, the founder of the original charity, to learn a little more.

NEO: When and how did Santa and Friends Nagoya start?

SFN: SFN was officially formed under the name Santa and Friends Nagoya in January 2009. However this is the 12th year that we have been visiting five local Nagoya orphanages. The concept of SFN was first started back in 2004 under a different name by our founder James Hedden, to celebrate Christmas, spread a little holiday cheer, and bring a few smiles to many children's and volunteer's faces. From 2009, the Smile Foundation and the Rainbow Foundation joined forces to create Santa and Friends Nagoya.



Each year with the assistance of over 100 volunteers, and very generous sponsors, we bring together 250+ orphans from five different local orphanages for an amazing full day Christmas celebration extravaganza. Hence Santa and Friends Nagoya! Christmas games, magicians, musicians, story-telling, interactive activities, crafts and cookie decorating are just a few of the activities offered to the children. The Christmas event has been our key event each and every year, yet from 2011 we decided to become more involved and interactive with each orphanage to develop closer relationships with the children.

With an awesome effort by our leaders, tantos, volunteers and of course our generous sponsors, we are now organizing, assisting with, and carrying out a number of activities with the kids each and every month. An annual Summer BBQ / Sports Day, monthly English classes, occasional dance and music classes, arts and crafts, ski trips and overall support are all underway. This year for 2017, we are in the planning stages of our December Christmas Olympics, which will see all children representing an individual country and participating in a number of activities and games before welcoming Santa for the finale and awards / closing ceremonies.

NEO: Can people outside of Nagoya help / donate? If so, how?

SFN: We welcome all people living and visiting the Chubu region to get involved with SFN, even if only here for a short time. To get involved, people can simply go to our website and sign up as a volunteer: www.santaandfriendsnagoya.com.

All those interested in getting involved will have to attend one of our monthly meetings before visiting one of the orphanages. This allows time to meet other volunteers and answer any questions and is in place to screen all potential volunteers.

For others who do not live in Japan or the Chubu region, and are interested in helping our cause, we welcome all donations. Head to www.santaandfriendsnagoya.com/forms/donate.php. ●

DIGIMONSTORY CYBERSLEUTH HACKER'S MEMORY



HACK YOUR WAY TO THE TRUTH!



PS4 PSVITA 19TH JANUARY 2018

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[ANIME REVIEW]

DIGIMON ADVENTURE TRI. 3: CONFESSION

Digital world, real feelings...

OUT NOW // MANGA UK // CERT PG // ACTION, COMEDY, DRAMA // £14.99 (DVD), £19.99 (BLU-RAY) // 105 MINS

PLOT *Digimon Adventure tri. 3: Confession* sees the Digi-destined and their partners fight their greatest battle yet, and it's one that they may not come out from unscathed. Will the Digimon be able to withstand the infection that's running rampant throughout the digital world, or will they be lost to it forever?

Confession is the third movie in the *tri* series, and it's the best entry so far. After the events of the second movie, *Determination*, the Digi-destined find themselves in the midst of their greatest battle yet. It's not only the world at stake in *Confession*, but the Digi-destined and their relationship with their Digimon partners. There's an infection spreading throughout the digital world, and the Digimon are slowly succumbing to it. As computer whiz Izzy frantically searches for a way to keep the virus at bay, the Digi-destined spend precious time with their Digimon in case the worst comes to be – that they might have to call it quits on their life-long friendships.

Meicoomon is still missing and her partner, Meiko, becomes deeply depressed and feels at fault for her Digimon playing a part in the rampaging infection, and she quickly sees her life spiralling out of control. She isn't alone though,

as the Digi-destined are there to comfort her and help her through her time in need, and all of them wish to see Meicoomon returned safe and sound. *Digimon* has always featured mature themes, especially for a children's show, and there are plenty of emotional moments to wade through in *Confession*. T.K. and Patamon's relationship is heavily focused on and, as one of the youngest members of the group, T.K. is the one who is struggling the most with what could be the end of his friendship with Patamon.

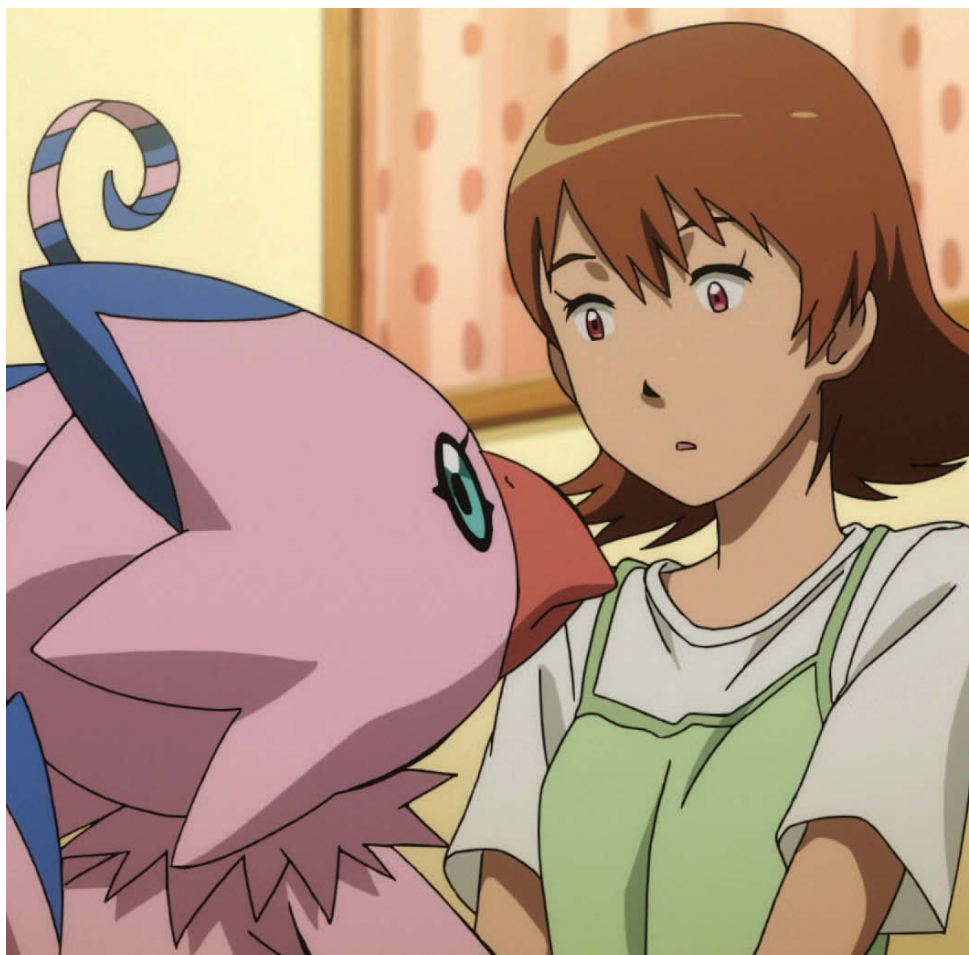
The movie's overarching narrative is built upon here with Meicoomon at the centre of it, particularly with some revelations made in the final moments of the movie. There are hidden agendas in every corner of *Confession*, but it's hard to properly piece them all together at this point. Many questions need to be answered, and although *Confession* isn't forthcoming in providing resolutions, it does begin a new arc which will be deeply explored in the series' next entry. It's difficult to say what *tri*'s end game is, but it's been an enjoyable journey so far.

Toei has done a stellar job with the movie's visuals, successfully capturing the wide range of emotions necessary for the narrative. The animation may be hard to admire through the constant flow of tears... but it's fluid, bursting with colour, and an absolute delight to watch. Its art style may greatly differ from that which is seen in the original TV series, but it manages to feel like a perfect fit.

There's not a whole lot of action in *Confession* (as the movie opts to show off more social interaction between

VOCAL TALENT

Despite the original TV series airing way back in 1999, many of the show's voice actors and actresses reprise their roles here.



friends), but there's a tense scene towards the end where the mega evolution of a certain Digimon is seen – in anime, at least – for the very first time.

There's plenty of fan-service in the *tri* movies, but it never feels anything other than natural. In a world where Digimon are widely known about by the public and, to a large extent, feared, it's understandable that these new situations bring about greater power. A small handful of Digimon want to protect the human world from the villains that roam the digital world, and it's a constant uphill battle.

"MANY QUESTIONS NEED TO BE ANSWERED, AND ALTHOUGH *CONFESSION* ISN'T FORTHCOMING IN PROVIDING RESOLUTIONS, IT DOES BEGIN A NEW ARC WHICH'LL BE DEEPLY EXPLORED IN THE SERIES' NEXT ENTRY.."

Whilst it's a shame that the entire voice cast from the original TV series couldn't return to reprise their roles, it's wonderful that at least some of the actors make a comeback. Tai's Joshua Seth takes up the mantle as the leader of the Digi-destined once again, even if his leadership qualities are

questionable during *Confession*. What doesn't make another appearance is the English version of the series' theme (you know the one), but *Butter-Fly* is as strong as it's always been. There's a beautiful orchestral version of the song in the movie which brilliantly captures its spirit, and it's nothing short of phenomenal. Much of the music compliments the movie's solemn and desperate atmosphere, and the piano is the perfect instrument for it.

Digimon Adventure tri. 3: Confession is the third movie in the six-movie series, and we're glad to say that each entry has been more enticing than the last. Manga's satisfyingly fast release schedule for the titles is also a boon for fans. If you were worried about how one of your favourite childhood shows translates to the big screen and a whole new movie series, then rest assured that *tri* fully understands what the appeal of *Digimon* is, and adapts it for the now older characters. Not many series can handle a return to form quite as elegantly, but Toei Animation has nailed it. The *tri* movies are the perfect way to continue the series' long-lasting legacy, and there are still three more instalments to enjoy after this one! Of course, the wait for them isn't nearly as enjoyable, but they've proven to be worth it.

***Digimon Adventure tri. 3: Confession* is the strongest entry in the *tri* series so far, and it does a wonderful job in highlighting the relationships between the Digi-Destined and their Digimon. Packed with action, emotion and nostalgia, *Confession* proves to be nothing short of fantastic. ●**

★★★★★

IF YOU LIKE THIS

Check out *Yokai Watch*. Originally a game developed by Level-5, the franchise now includes anime, a movie, and six manga series!



KONKATSU

The term *konkatsu*, or “marriage hunting” was coined in 2007, originally to describe anything that might improve marriage chances, from lessons in deportment to a push-up bra. Today it is often applied to services in that grey area between the rigidly arranged, old-fashioned *omiai* introduction services and the everyday dating. Konkatsu services aim to put like-minded singles together at social events, on the understanding that this is not a casual thing, but an assembly of people who are seriously in the market for marriage.

MANGA SNAPSHOT

COMIC BE

Jonathan Clements is often accused of being tart

ISSUE 54 // DEBUT YEAR: 2011 // PAGE COUNT: 202 // PUBLISHER: FUSION PRODUCT // PRICE: 490 YEN (£3.27) // CYCLE: MONTHLY

“PEOPLE AND CHERRIES,” reads the coverline, “both can be tart.” Or “both can be bitter”. Neither term in English really conveys the original Japanese adequately, because both have secondary associations. Life, the line seems to say, may not always be a box of chocolates.

The ongoing quest to make life as difficult as possible for NEO’s design staff continues with a cover that has no writing on it at all. Instead, the front of *Comic Be* (1) is a single, striking colour image, a centimetre narrower than the rest of the magazine. The details of the issue number, price, featured artists and even the title of the magazine are squashed into a tiny strip on the first page, visible through the gap between the cover size and the page size. Yes, it looks like we are back in the realm of self-consciously arty Japanese comics, presented in this case for an audience of other artists.

Ever since *Comic Be* first sprang to life in 2011, it has openly served an audience of creative sorts. Its advertising pages are given over to small-press printers and comic marts, serving an audience identified by market researchers a decade or so ago as the “female *dojin otaku*” – women in their 20s and up, whose love of comics extends to the production and sale of their own products. We usually translate the term *dojinshi* as “fanzine”, but the sheer size of Japanese comics fandom takes supposed amateurs to a whole new level. If you’re printing in runs of five or ten thousand copies, to a professional level of quality, then your “fanzine” is less of a hobby and more of a second business. Sometimes, in fact, these supposed fanzines are actually the off-duty trials of professional artists... something that I suspect may well be the case with *Comic Be*.

Inumike (2), by “Moucon Icchisen” anthropomorphises a puppy as a small child, putting the reader in the position of the dog’s occasionally exasperated, but usually charmed owner. It seemingly fulfils a double fantasy, of a pet as a child-substitute, but also of a pet that has a human ability to communicate. This is, when all is said and done, a pet that can answer back, whose expressions are more readily readable, and whose commentary on the action is never in doubt. Creator Moucon is better known in the manga world for “boys’ love” tales, but here the boys are not loving each other, but instead deeply invested in caring for little animal-eared moppets in baby-grows.

By a remarkable coincidence, creator Huku Kazemachi seems to approach the same idea from the opposite angle,

writing up her life as a young mother as if she is somehow charged with caring for two argumentative animals in *Dinner with Shiro and Kuro* (3). The little animal ears and cutesy, squashed-down look is the same, but this time I think we really are talking about the artist’s children, whose fussy eating habits can only be dispelled by involving them directly in the preparation of the food.

Dinner with Shiro and Kuro is not the only autobiography that sneaks into *Comic Be*, a magazine that often seems to invite its artists to draw directly on their home life for inspiration. Another author, “Hideki”, chronicles her social life in a manga with one of those incredibly convoluted titles that are so fashionable at the moment, translating as something like *But I Really Want to Get Married: The Story of a Manga Creator Ramping Up Her Feminine Wiles* (4).

Informed by a fortune-teller that she has zero chance of landing a man, Hideki refuses to take no for an answer, and goes looking for a second opinion... and a third... The story is bitty and chaotic like a scrapbook, less a narrative than a stream of consciousness as she recounts the activities that have kept her and her enthusiastic best friend busy all month. It’s a fun glimpse inside the mind of a woman who wants to believe, even though she refuses to believe what she hears – a fitting examination of the love / hate relationship that vulnerable people can have with the supposed sureties of astrology, tarot and tea-leaf reading.

Marriage is also at least technically on cards for the hero of Haruhi Kasuga’s *Konkatsu Moso Yakuniku*, the tale of a manga artist who has somehow become involved in an introduction agency for would-be brides and grooms. The result is a workplace drama with a shifting supporting cast of both hopefuls and no-hopers, set at a bunch of meet-and-greets in a yakiniku restaurant. Reading between the lines, however, several of the cast, including the handsome manga artist himself, are not all that interested in girls, and a not-so-subtext soon predominates, of gays both in and out of the closet, either gravitating towards the *konkatsu* club in search of a beard, or pushed unwillingly in its direction while they grapple with their true feelings.

So far, so good – these comics are all nice enough. But they are not the star contents of *Comic Be*... for that, you’ll have to turn the page.

>>>



POV BOYS: HIMO + KARESHI

COMIC BE IS flagrantly experimental, most notably with the shared-world format of *Himo + Kareshi*, a franchise shared out between a trio of artists, each of whom comes up with their own interpretation (5). The title plays with two categories of companion, the latter being the normal kind of boyfriend, and the former being a scrounger who lives off his woman. But that's not the clever part – the artwork is drawn as if this were a first-person shooter and you were the camera. In “Mana Aizen’s” story, *Satoru Arimura* (6), the titular boyfriend brings you your coffee, he asks about your day, and he comes along with you and your friends to a restaurant. But the whole thing is drawn from your point of view. All we see of you is the occasional extremity, when you look down at your shoes, or at his hand holding yours.

Artistically, this is not particularly unusual. Anyone who has played a video game in the last 30 years has probably seen this kind of point-of-view perspective. But it's something else on a manga page, as your boyfriend answers questions you have presumably asked, and laughs at jokes that only he can hear.

It's not the same boyfriend every time. “Sousan’s” man is *Katsuki Sagara* (7), a slacker in a part-time job who is embarrassed to be caught in a pachinko parlour when he was supposed to be meeting you on a date. The drama, such as it is, is him pleading for forgiveness and trying to buy your affection with chocolates and jewellery. And then, in “Sanya’s” variant,

he's *Ryotaro Koga* (8), a preppy university student who really needs to stop playing with his phone while you're both out at the fairground.

I don't know about you, but I find this fascinating. It's not merely the accomplished artistry of these creators, but the gentle quietitude with which they go about it – the actual art credits are written so small I could hardly see them. It's the title itself that gets all the attention, and even that is intriguing. Because these aren't dreamboats or potential husbands, this isn't a romance in the making – these are *himo*: scrubs, losers, deadbeats. The participants in this manga are literally imagining themselves in the company of an indifferent sponger – I don't know, maybe as a fixer-upper, or maybe as an opportunity to roll one's eyes and commiserate with the girls about how all men are bastards. It would be like me coming up with a comic in which I invent an imaginary girlfriend and then complain about what a psycho she is.

On many occasions in this column, I have lampooned and ridiculed the fantasy relationships we see on the manga page – girlfriends who are little more than pneumatic sex dolls, boyfriends who are either too good to be true or dastardly cads, gay romances as likely as a unicorn farting rainbows. But here we have artists who seem to be leaping, gleefully, at the chance to play around with some gritty complexities – an other half who's crap in company (*Satoru Arimura*), a hook-up who's frustratingly unreliable (*Katsuki Sagara*), and a college boy who's plainly just not that into you (*Ryotaro Koga*).



"EVER SINCE *COMIC BE* FIRST SPRANG TO LIFE IN 2011, IT HAS OPENLY SERVED AN AUDIENCE OF CREATIVE SORTS. ITS ADVERTISING PAGES ARE GIVEN OVER TO SMALL-PRESS PRINTERS AND COMIC MARTS, SERVING AN AUDIENCE IDENTIFIED BY MARKET RESEARCHERS A DECADE OR SO AGO AS THE "FEMALE DOJIN OTAKU"



And it's an experiment – that much is plain, not only from the venue where it appears, but also from the short, short page-counts of each vignette. Moreover, it's not the himo part that's the ongoing part of the franchise, it's the *kareshi*. An advert elsewhere in the issue invites readers to get stuck into *Hentai + Kareshi*, another serial that presumably revisits the same idea, but this time with boyfriends who are all irredeemable perverts. I was unable to resist going online and checking the back issues. There, I discovered, you can read *Sensei + Kareshi*, presumably about women in a relationship with an authority figure, and the baffling *Anmin + Kareshi*, which is something to do with getting a good night's sleep!

Even the tiniest details are exciting, as the reader's eye is drawn to those tiny moments that give clues about the self-image of the artist. What kind of shoes does she wear? What kind of fingernails does she have? Who is this woman / these women...?

Himo + Kareshi is truly inspiring. What a wonderful way for an artist to try out new ideas and new set-ups, and to get into a dialogue with her fellow artists, along the lines of: "Hey, ladies, let's all come back next month with a five-pager about going out with an older man... or a younger man... or a married

man... or a workaholic... or an alcoholic..." The first-person perspective is also great fun to play with – I've seen it before on the analogue 1990s precursor of the dating sim, a video in which a handsome young man addresses the camera on a virtual date, and indeed, the format is descended from men's magazine photo-stories dating back at least as far as the 1970s. But seeing it in manga form is quite boggling, and just goes to show that Japanese comics can continue to surprise even the jaded old critic. ●

"THESE AREN'T DREAMBOATS OR POTENTIAL HUSBANDS, THIS ISN'T A ROMANCE IN THE MAKING – THESE ARE HIMO: SCRUBS, LOSERS, DEADBEATS"

HIMO & HER

A *himo* is a rope, a knot or a tie, and in Japanese slang it has come to mean a man whose financial success relies on his woman. It used to mean pimp, but in modern times it has come to mean something more like sponger.

ANIME EXPOSÉ

LAND OF THE LUSTROUS

Diamonds are forever



WE HAVE TWO contrasting titles to look at this month. Over the page, we have *Inuyashiki*, a shocker which resonates with real-life horrors in Japan. But first, we're looking at an extravagantly imagined and mounted fantasy, far removed from swords and sorcery. Okay, so maybe we should be more sceptical about it. Early episodes often give a distorted view of a series, because they're the most surprising and open-ended, before formula sets in. But the opening episodes of *Land of the Lustrous* really do feel like they could go *anywhere*.

The setting's a beautiful Earth-like planet, though whether it is Earth is unclear at first. There's no "civilisation" in sight; instead we start with a community of a few dozen humanoids. These people are... well, it doesn't look like they have human genders, but they appear somewhere between feminine and androgynous (they're voiced by female actors). They have names like Diamond, Jade, Obsidian and Amethyst, which might suggest they belong to an idol group or a magic girl team. Actually, they're made of living stone.

Yes, really. One nice reminder of this fact is when they walk through the palatial building that's their home, and we continually hear the pleasant ring of their feet, stone on stone. They're seemingly immortal – we learn that the oldest women have lived for thousands of years. They're breakable, but even if they're reduced to fragments, they can still be mended and restored, good as new. (Or almost – if pieces of them are lost, they will lose some memories of their lives.) These beings feel like fairy tale creations, like the living china dolls in the original

Wizard of Oz book. (They were cut out of the musical, though a china doll woman played a big part in Disney's *Oz the Great and Terrible*.)

But the women's adversaries feel even more fairy tale-ish, especially to Japanese viewers. These are the "Lunarians," beings that look like Buddhist statues and appear suddenly on giant floating clouds, trying to capture the women and take them to their home, which is... the moon.

If you're a Ghibli fan, you'll feel *deja vu*. The Lunarians are surely lifted from *Princess Kaguya*, aka *The Tale of the Bamboo Cutter*, which is Japan's oldest folklore from the tenth century. Kaguya is the tale of a magic princess who tries to live a human life, but who really hails from the moon; eventually, celestial beings arrive to force her to return. (Ghibli director Isao Takahata turned *Kaguya* into an Oscar-nominated film in 2013; the heavenly host at the film's climax was visualised much like the Lunarians in *Lustrous*.)

RUNT OF THE LITTER

In *Lustrous*, though, there's no princess. The misfit main character (who we'll provisionally call "she") is more of a cute ugly duckling.

Phos is the youngest of the jewel people, a mere three centuries old. She's also fragile and, in the view of her peers, a deeply annoying brat. She constantly demands to join the fight against the Lunarians – clearly absurd – or be given a cool job.



"PHOS IS ONE OF THE MOST LIKABLE 'MOUTHY' LEADS SINCE MAKOTO IN THE JUST-REISSUED *GIRL WHO LEAPT THROUGH TIME*."



The master of the jewel people does give Phos a job, perhaps to shut her up. Phos is told to collect data about her surroundings and compile an encyclopaedia. While roaming for research, Phos meets an unfamiliar jewel person, the red-haired Cinnabar. Most jewel people only function well in daylight, but Cinnabar's breath poisons the earth; for this reason, she's made herself an outcast, only coming out at night. Phos is instantly fascinated with Cinnabar, who seems to disdain Phos with a *personal* intensity – think of a word starting "tsun" and ending "dere".

By the way, if you were wondering who the master of the jewel people is, it seems to be the one *masculine* character around. He's a bald monk who spends most of his time in meditation, or maybe hibernation. His true nature is another mystery.

That's all we should spoil. From the early episodes, there are developments that make *Land of the Lustrous* a hugely intriguing series, like *From the New World* a few years ago. But much of the show's

enjoyment comes from its main character. Phos is one of the best 'mouthy' anime leads we've seen since Makoto in the just-reissued *Girl Who Leapt Through Time*. In its lighter moments, *Lustrous* feels close to that film, both in its charm and comedy.

The visuals are outstanding; exquisite verdant backdrops and some lovely character animation, highlighting not faces but the girls' balletic bodies. Like *Princess Principal*, this is a quality series that could be accused of excess fanservice, with long-legged girls in brief outfits. Then again, the portrait of feminine but flat-chested beauties, who seem very capable of romantically adoring each other, could be equally praised for its genderfluid vision. ●

INCOMING FOR 2018!

The series has been announced as an acquisition for the UK by MVM, along with two other outstanding 2017 anime: *Princess Principal* and *Made in Abyss*.

ALSO STREAMING...



GIRLS' LAST TOUR

We've seen post-apocalyptic moe shows before – the classic case is *School-Live!*, about cute girls living in a zombie apocalypse. (A live-action *School-Live!* Japanese film was recently announced; if you can picture how on earth it can work with flesh-and-blood actors, then you're doing better than us.) *Girls' Last Tour* is another show in that vein, with the moe and the apocalypse but without any zombies, as two girls travel through an empty – well, almost empty – ruined city.



THE ANCIENT MAGUS' BRIDE

The Wit studio is best known for making a certain series about man-eating giants (whose third season is due July 2018). However, Wit took time out from *Titans* to make this fantasy drama about a tragic teenage girl who is sold – yes, *sold* – to the enigmatic skull-faced "magus" of the title. The magic-permeated world in the series has been praised by fans, as has the central pairing; maybe it's the anime to try on non-fans who love *Beauty and the Beast*.



RECOVERY OF AN MMO JUNKIE

MMO, if you're wondering, is an abbreviation of MMORPG, which is an abbreviation of... look, if you don't know, you may not be the target audience. Okay, this is a comedy-drama about an online games addict – typical enough, except she's a 30-year old female office worker. It's a subject that's been done outside anime, in Felicia Day's excellent live-action *The Guild* (released on YouTube). But one of *Recovery's* main supporting characters is a socially inept blond businessman... who's half-British. That we have to see!

ANIME EXPOSÉ

INUYASHIKI

From the creator of *Gantz*...



INUYASHIKI IS BASED on a manga by Hiroya Oku, the author of the lurid *Gantz*; it's a very interesting, sometimes incredibly shocking series. How good it is is questionable – we'll get to that later. But one of the interesting things about *Inuyashiki* is how it's coincided with real-world news in Japan. Bear with us for the next couple of paragraphs, while we sketch the context.

If you follow Japanese news, you'll know there've been grim crime stories recently, including two high-profile serial killer cases. This November, a 70-year-old woman, Chisako Kakehi, was sentenced to death for killing at least three men, including her husband, with cyanide. But the "Black Widow" headlines in Japan's newspapers had to jostle for space with an even worse case. The remains of nine people – eight female, one male – were found in a Tokyo house, where the suspect had reportedly lured them through Twitter. The story broke on Halloween, overlaying festive frights with real horror.

Soon after, a Japanese politician – Ichita Yamamoto, of the ruling Liberal Democratic Party – controversially suggested on TV that such crimes could be linked to anime and video games. He claimed some people could not distinguish between fantasy and reality, and might be influenced in dangerous ways by gruesome fictional scenarios. Of course, this rhetoric isn't new. It goes back decades, to cases like the James Bulger murder in Britain in 1993, or Japan's Tsutomu Miyazaki, a child murderer in the 1980s whom the press dubbed the Otaku Killer.

What does all this have to do with *Inuyashiki*? Well, while the series has sci-fi and even superhero elements, it's also a serial-killer anime, set in modern, real

Japan. The murderer is killing ordinary people, walking calmly into houses and wiping out families, children included. And there's no ambiguity about who this killer is. He's a schoolboy who loves manga, *and seems to find them more real than actual life*. Make no mistake; this is an anime that's playing with fire.

In one of the most appalling scenes in the series, the boy corners a hysterical girl after killing her loved ones and starts asking her earnestly about *One Piece* – yes, *One Piece*. A less brazen series would have surely invented an imaginary, *One Piece*-ish title for the script to keep some kind of distance, but not *Inuyashiki*. It's a stomach-churning moment, and briefly suggests the show might turn into anime's answer to the audience-baiting *Funny Games* film by Michael Haneke (which also has an almost unwatchably upsetting home invasion).

ROBOT WARS

In fact, *Inuyashiki* doesn't go that way. Indeed, much of it's pretty goofy, getting goofier as it goes along. In the first episode, the boy, Hiro, happens to be in an almost-deserted Tokyo park at night. The only other person there, by chance, is an older man, who will be the other main character. Meet Ichiro; he's 58, though he looks a decade or more older than that. He's a pitifully helpless loser, whose own wife and kids are treating him as a doormat. Moreover, his doctor has told him he has cancer, and just weeks to live. Ichiro runs sobbing up to the park...

... where he and Hiro meet their destiny, in one of the most cheesily throwaway origin stories imaginable. Get this: a spaceship slides into the park from another dimension, pulverising the two humans. The unseen aliens "fix" the problem by



Mea Culpa

There's a surprise footnote to the anecdote in the main text, about the politician who tried to link anime to real crimes. Very soon afterwards, Ichita Yamamoto retracted his claims and apologised, promising "I will take proper care never to make such baseless comments again". A likely reason for the turnaround is that Yamamoto is involved in the government's "Cool Japan Committee", which aims to *promote* anime to the world. Surely he realised that his comments wouldn't be good PR...

True Crime

As of writing, there've been no stories of *Inuyashiki* being censored, but TV anime in Japan has been taken off air for being too near to real crime. This happened to the gory *Psycho-Pass* when it was repeated on TV in 2014. During that time, there was a particularly horrible murder case, involving a schoolgirl killing a female classmate. If you've seen *Psycho-Pass*, you'll remember an episode dealing with a similar subject – the show's creators themselves cancelled the broadcast as inappropriate.

1. Hiro wreaks carnage in central Tokyo. 2. Ichiro wins his first battle, without killing anyone. 3. Ichiro reacts to his 'upgrade.'

rebuilding Ichiro's and Hiro's bodies with spare weapons units, incorporating massively advanced tech. This means when Ichiro wakes up, he no longer has cancer but has a robot body instead. Almost at once, Ichiro starts doing good: saving victims from thugs, playing the guardian angel at house fires, even healing people's terminal illnesses by laying on hands. As for Hiro... Well, see above.

One of the show's ambiguities is how much Hiro's and Ichiro's actions come from their pre-robot personalities. Ichiro, clearly, was always kind by nature (he comes across an abandoned dog in the first episode and promptly adopts it). Meanwhile we see a flashback to a chilly child Hiro, wondering why the death of strangers should make him sad. But both characters are pushed to extreme behaviour by the existential shock of getting robot bodies; in both cases, they save or destroy lives to feel "real" again.

This is powerful stuff, and at best the storytelling is masterful, with two terrific lead characters. The main problem – apart from mediocre animation from the classy MAPPA studio – is that the middle episodes slide into utter preposterousness, set in a Tokyo of monster murderers a la *Sin City* or the old *Death Wish* films. But it may perk up at the end; either way, it already contains moments that are some of the most shocking and provocative in a mainstream anime. ●

PROMISING BEGINNINGS

The excellent title sequence seems modelled on the overblown titles of *James Bond* films. The title song is by the rock band Man with a Mission, as heard on *Log Horizon* and *Gundam: Iron Blooded Orphans*.



SAD SWING

Despite *Inuyashiki*'s lurid subject, there's a high-culture nod in the first episode. After Ichiro hears he has terminal cancer, he's glimpsed on a children's swing in a playground, singing a classic Japanese song (*Gondola no Uta*) about life's brevity. The moment references an Akira Kurosawa film, *Ikiru* (1952), about a middle-aged bureaucrat who also learns he has terminal cancer. *Ikiru*'s character does not become a super robot; rather, he finds fulfilment by creating a children's playground.



LOVERITES

"They are awesome!"
- Lzzy Hale (HALESTORM)
"Seriously kick ass!"
- Nita Strauss (ALICE COOPER)
"A big thumbs up and metal horns!"
- Timo Kotipelto (STRATOVARIUS)
"Awesome!"
- Kiko Loureiro (MEGADETH)



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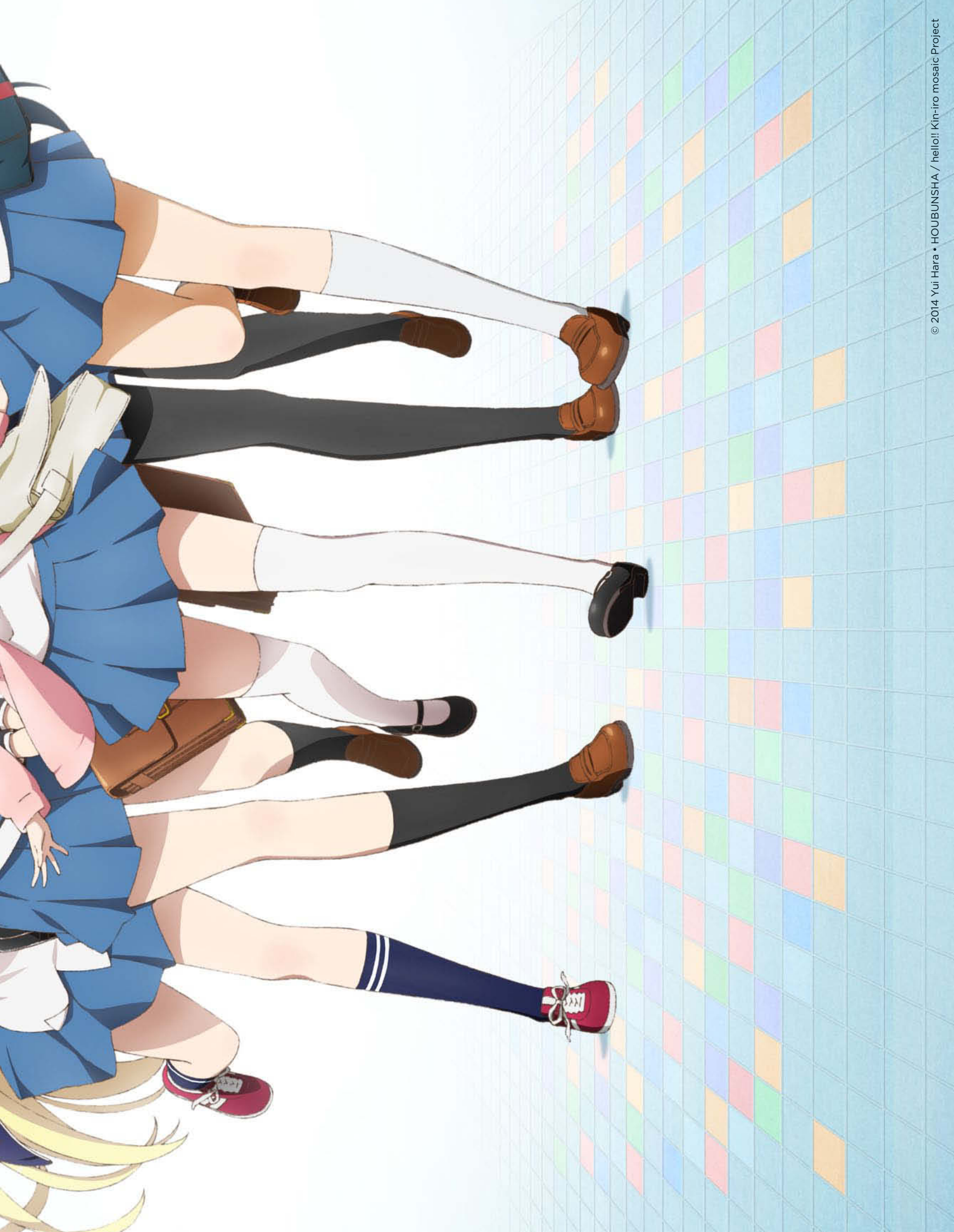
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WE'RE ALL TALKING ABOUT...

NEW YEAR RESOLUTIONS

Our readers share their hopes for the New Year and their resolutions for 2018!



f ANTONY DIMITRI JAMES

I'm planning a solo trip in July to New York for a couple days and hopefully (if I get a badge) travel from New York to San Diego for Comic Con.

f ADAM D POOL

Finally get to visit Japan so I can practice my language skills. And visit Akihabara.

f DAN GROVES

My New Year's resolutions are to return to driving lessons, and then try out some recommended anime that I have not seen yet.

f LYSERG MARIE

Revise more, finish my Cheshire cosplay and learn to play the violin!

f JULIE POTTEN

My New Year's resolutions are to find a new home and a new job.

f CONNOR ATKINS

Get car driving licence and watch more anime.

t ALASTAIR OMAND **@KNEEFALCON**

My main #NewYearsResolution is to actually watch anime on Netflix rather than just adding it to my list and forgetting.

t ONCE IN ROYAL DAVID'S **CITY SAUNDERS @XPV1**

Watch more anime of course :)

t BUNNY HOLT **@GLAMPINGQ**

I want to save up and travel to Japan! My plan is to go to climb Mount Fuji and visit Tokyo. I want to eat omurice and fresh sashimi. I want to go to Shibuya and Harajuku! I'm going to visit Tokyu Hands and spend hours browsing the kitchen department too!

f SABINE FOX

Hoping to go to some cons later on in 2018 with the other half and our one year old, who by that time will be two. It will be our first time as a family going to them since the last was when we were as a couple. We are very much looking forward to it!

t JASON MADDISON **@THEMADDISONJEI**

To keep hounding Anime Limited to release the original *Evangelion* series on Blu Ray!

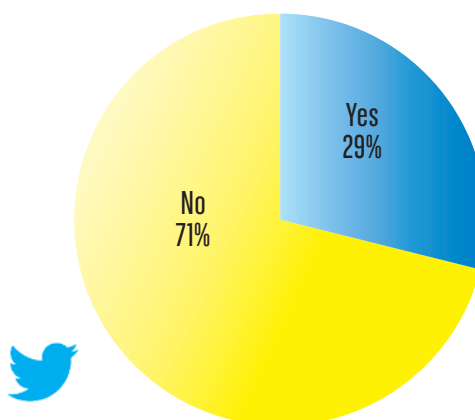
t MERRYOTAKU **@RUBYOTAKU_**

Mine are to lose weight, spend less money and progress even further with my transition.

t MEG **@MAKINGMEGHAN**

Always moving towards self-improvement, so I'll be working out more and learning a new skill!

TOP THREE ACCORDING TO STATISTICBRAIN.COM, THE TOP THREE NEW YEAR'S RESOLUTIONS FOR 2017 WERE LOSING WEIGHT, SELF-IMPROVEMENTS, AND BETTER FINANCIAL DECISIONS.



TWITTER POLL

Did you keep your resolutions last year?

RESOLUTIONS LAST YEAR WE ASKED OUR READERS WHETHER THEY MADE NEW YEAR'S RESOLUTIONS, AND 64% OF YOU SAID YOU DID, AND 36% DIDN'T!

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MOVIES FOR 2018!

The coming year is set to be packed with nourishing movie goodness, with classics from the Shaw Brothers' archive, hard-hitting thrillers from South Korea, two of the biggest blockbusters in Chinese cinema history, kung fu galore and the return of action man Tak Sakaguchi! David West runs down the roster of the cinematic delights coming your way in 2018.





ONE-ARMED SWORDSMAN

The Sound Of One Hand Hacking

OUT: 22 JANUARY // DISTRIBUTOR: 88 FILMS

Chang Cheh's 1967 wu xia film for Shaw Brothers studio was a pivotal moment in Hong Kong cinema, making a star of Wang Yu and earning Chang his nickname as The Million Dollar Director. It's the story of Fang Kang (Wang Yu) who loses his right arm thanks to the capricious, bratty daughter of his master. But when a squad of killers target his old teacher and start slaughtering all his pupils, Fang has to unleash some one-armed fury to stop their reign of terror. Decades later, Tsui Hark remade the film as *The Blade*, but the original remains the classic.



THE DRAGON MISSILE

Don't Lose Your Head

OUT: 26 MARCH // DISTRIBUTOR: 88 FILMS

Ho Meng-Hua's *The Dragon Missile* was one of a spate of films to follow in the wake of 1975's *The Flying Guillotine* that featured protagonists beheading their opponents with some sort of exotic projectile weapon. In this case, the titular Dragon Missile is a razor-sharp boomerang wielded by Lo Lieh's hero, who's on a mission to recover a rare elixir for his ailing lord. The cast includes Shaw Brothers' mainstay Norman Tsui alongside Lau Wing from *Way Of The Dragon*, plus action direction by Yuen Cheung-Yan and *One-Armed Swordsman* choreographer Tong Kai.



THE ENCHANTING GHOST

Love In A Haunted House

OUT: 26 FEBRUARY // DISTRIBUTOR: 88 FILMS

In the late '60s and early '70s director Chou Hsu-Chiang crafted a little niche for himself in Hong Kong cinema with tales of the supernatural that blended romance with the paranormal. 1970's *The Enchanting Ghost* is a case in point, following a young scholar (played by Yang Li-Hua in a genre-swapping performance) who, fleeing his evil uncle, takes up residence in an abandoned house where he meets a beautiful young woman and her mother. But he soon starts to suspect the house is haunted, and that the beauty who has stolen his heart may not be all she seems. 88 Films already released Chou's excellent *The Bride From Hell* and now *The Enchanting Ghost* is ready to materialise.

THE GHOST LOVERS

Romeo And Juliet Shaw's Style

OUT: 12 MARCH // DISTRIBUTOR: 88 FILMS

Another tale of romance reaching beyond the grave from the Shaw Brothers vaults, this time with Korean director Shin Sang-ok at the helm. Li Ching plays Song Lian-Hua, who was betrothed to Han Shi-Long (Lam Wai-Tiu) when they were just infants, but they have never met. He's on his way to finally meet her as Song lies on her deathbed, and alas, thanks to his being attacked and robbed along the way, he arrives too late. Song is dead. Or is she? Director Shin was infamously abducted by Kim Jong-il and spent decades making films for the North Korean dictator.





NEW WORLD

Election Fever Mob-Style

OUT: 15 JANUARY // DISTRIBUTOR: MONTAGE PICTURES

After the boss of the powerful Goldmoon crime syndicate dies unexpectedly, the contest to claim the vacant throne erupts into violence. The top two contenders are calculating and ruthless Lee Jeong-gu (Park Seong-ung), and Jeong Cheong (Hwang Jeong-min), a hot-tempered nutjob. Watching the contest very closely are police chief Kang (Choi Min-sik) and Lee Jeong-jae (Lee Ja-seng), a cop deep undercover within the syndicate. Director Park Hoon-jung wrote the script for *I Saw The Devil*, so expect brutality and plenty of it as Kang tries to exploit the discord among the mobsters.



SEA FOG

Low Deeds On The High Seas

OUT: 26 MARCH // DISTRIBUTOR: 88 FILMS

This thriller from director Shim Sung-boo and producer Bong Joon-ho sets course for darkness with a story about human trafficking. Set in 1998 when the South Korean economy was in dire straits during the Asian financial crisis, the film sees a group of fishermen decide to raise the money they need to keep their ship afloat by smuggling people from China to Korea. When the voyage sails into trouble, everything turns nasty very quickly. Kim Yun-seok, the terrifying hatchet-wielding villain of *The Yellow Sea*, plays the captain of the ship, while Park Yoo-chun plays a young sailor who falls for one of their human cargo played by Han Ye-rin.

IRIS: THE MOVIE

Spies In Love And War

OUT: TBC // DISTRIBUTOR: 88 FILMS

Iris: The Movie is the feature-length version of a 20-episode television series that aired in South Korea in 2009. The high-profile cast includes Lee Byung-hun, Kim Tae-hee, and Kim So-yeon in a story about South Korean secret agents fighting a terrorist organisation, called IRIS, who plan to detonate a nuclear bomb. Fiends. There are romantic complications as rivals Hyeon-jun (Lee Byung-hun) and Sa-woo (Jeong Jun-ho) compete for the attentions of Seung-hee (Kim Tae-hee), not to mention double agents, double crosses, spectacular chase scenes, and Lee Byung-hun in full Jason Bourne mode.



GIFTED

Addicted To Murder

OUT: TBC // DISTRIBUTOR: 88 FILMS

Out of work, out of money, and dumped by his girlfriend for trying to conceal the sorry state of his life, Kim Min-soo (Kim Beom-joon) starts stealing cars to earn money. During a run-in with his old boss, Min-soo's frayed nerves snap, and he lashes out. In the midst of his rage-fuelled assault, Min-soo discovers he gets a thrill out of murder and soon becomes addicted to the rush of killing. Director Juhn Jai-hong began his career as an Assistant Director to Kim Ki-duk, so expect some of Kim's darkness and provocative style to have rubbed off on *Gifted*, which explores the psychosexual side of Min-soo's deadly compulsion.



SEIJUN SUZUKI: THE EARLY YEARS, VOL. 1

Teenage Kicks From Nikkatsu

OUT: 08 JANUARY // DISTRIBUTOR: ARROW VIDEO

A quintet of films from the dawn of Seijun Suzuki's career when he was making films about teenage rebels, romances and rabble-rousers at Nikkatsu studios in the late 1950s and early 1960s. *Born Under Crossed Stars* sees its protagonist torn between two girls; *The Incurable* concerns a boy kicked out of school for fighting and the girl who falls for him; in *Teenage Yakuza* a plucky youngster tries to defend his hometown from mobsters; in *The Boy Who Came Back*, a young tearaway tries to go straight; and in *The Wind-of-Youth Group Crosses the Mountain Pass* a youngster gets involved with a travelling circus. No good will come of that, young man.



AN ACTOR'S REVENGE

Cross-dressed To Kill

OUT: 26 MARCH // DISTRIBUTOR: BFI

Kon Ichikawa's *An Actor's Revenge*, from 1963, is one of the most unconventional revenge movies ever made. Kazuo Hasegawa plays Yukinojo, a female impersonator in a Kabuki theatre company, out for vengeance on the three men who drove his parents to suicide. Hasegawa had previously played Yukinojo three decades earlier and his return to the role as a portly man in his mid-50s could easily have been a debacle, particularly in the love scenes with Wako Ayako, but it's such a rich visual experience that it never descends into pure camp. Ichikawa's use of theatrical staging and lighting, pop art aesthetics, and his deconstruction of cinematic conventions were ground-breaking for their time and still impress today.



HOUSE

Home Is Where The Hurt Is

OUT: 12 FEBRUARY // DISTRIBUTOR: EUREKA

Seeking a break from her dad and his new girlfriend, schoolgirl Angel (Kimiko Ikegami) takes six of her friends to stay at her aunt's house. Unfortunately, auntie's domicile offers no welcome respite as the girls are picked off one-by-one in increasingly bizarre and gruesome fashions. Nobuhiko Obayashi's *House*, or *Hausu*, is a psychedelic head-trip of a movie. Originally released to complete bafflement in 1977, it has become a cult classic and is set to enjoy its first UK Blu-ray release this February.

LEGEND OF THE MOUNTAIN

Who You Gonna Call?

OUT: 19 MARCH // DISTRIBUTOR: EUREKA

Sometimes you just want some peace and quiet to get on with your work. He Qingyun (Shih Chun) is a scholar trying to copy a lengthy Buddhist sutra, so he holes up in a remote temple and tries to crack on. Unfortunately, a night of boozing leads to him waking up to discover he's now engaged to Melody (Hsu Feng), plus there's a pretty barmaid called Cloud (Sylvia Chang) and a Taoist priest hanging about, some or all of whom might be ghosts. King Hu's 1979 supernatural yarn was shot in South Korea and inspired by Pu Songling's anthology *Stories From A Chinese Studio*. The film joins Eureka's Masters Of Cinema line this spring in a brand new 4k digital restoration.





BIRTH OF THE DRAGON Bruce Lee Lives Again

OUT: 23 FEBRUARY // **DISTRIBUTOR:** ALTITUDE FILM ENTERTAINMENT

Another entry in the cottage industry of Bruce Lee biopics that play fast and loose with fact, *Birth Of The Dragon* purports to tell the story of the match between Bruce Lee (Philip Ng) and Wong Jack Man (Yu Xia), a minor skirmish that has since entered the realm of mythology. Oddly, the script devotes as much time and energy to another character, Steve McKee (Billy Magnussen), trying to save his girlfriend from a Triad boss. Director George Nolfi was a screenwriter on *Ocean's Twelve* and *The Bourne Ultimatum*.

All eye witness accounts of the match between Lee and Wong describe it as a short and unspectacular affair but it's already been filmed in Rob Cohen's 1993 film *Dragon: The Bruce Lee Story* as a titanic tussle held in a secret underground arena, and it seems unlikely Nolfi's effort will offer anything more realistic. Equally problematic is the film's attempt to credit Lee's revolutionary ideas about the martial arts to Wong.

Take with a pinch of salt.

THE SHANGHAI JOB

Bloom Gets Tough

OUT: 05 FEBRUARY // **DISTRIBUTOR:** SIGNATURE ENTERTAINMENT

Taking a break from elving around in Middle Earth, Orlando Bloom takes the lead in *The Shanghai Job* for British director Charles Martin. The film casts Bloom as private security agent Danny Stratton who is assigned to guard a rare antique as its transported to a new home from Shanghai. But when the antique is snatched, Stratton will stop at nothing to get it back.

The cast includes the always excellent Simon Yam as Mach, one of Stratton's team members, Lynn Hung from the *Ip Man* trilogy, and martial arts star Xing Yu, from *Shaolin*, as one of the bad guys. Plus, the fight choreography is handled by Tomer Oz, who worked on *Dragon Blade* and *Chinese Zodiac* with Jackie Chan.



THE FINAL MASTER

Fight For Your Rights To Teach

OUT: 19 FEBRUARY // **DISTRIBUTOR:** CINE ASIA

The Final Master is the latest martial arts outing from Xu Haofeng, director of *The Sword Identity* and writer on *The Grandmaster*. Chen Shi (Liao Fan) is a Wing Chun master who moves to the city of Tianjin hoping to open his own school. There's just one problem. Local lore dictates that any aspirants must first defeat eight fighters from the local kung fu schools, but anyone who does so will be expelled from the city to preserve its reputation in the martial arts community. Looking for a loophole, Chen recruits a labourer, Liangchen (Song Yang), and trains him to fight in his place, but the best laid plans of mice and kung fu masters often go awry. There are forces at play within the martial arts world that will shape Chen's fate in ways he cannot foresee.





WOLF WARRIOR 2

Wu Jing Conquers The World

OUT: 29 JANUARY // DISTRIBUTOR: CINE ASIA

The film that demolished records at the Chinese box office, *Wolf Warrior 2* stars Wu Jing as Leng Feng, a Chinese special forces sniper and all-round butt-kicker defending a hospital from a squad of deadly mercenaries, led by Big Daddy (Frank Grillo), in a war-torn African nation. *Wolf Warriors 2* attracted more than 150 million people to cinemas and surpassed US\$851 million at the Chinese box office, compared to the original *Wolf Warrior*'s US\$90 million.

The cast includes Celina Jade as Dr Rachel Smith who holds the cure to a lethal virus threatening the locals. Can the good doctor and the super-sniper save the day? Yes. Yes, they can – but along the way a great many things will explode in spectacular fashion. It's box office gold, baby.



BROTHERHOOD OF BLADES II

A Song Of Swords

OUT: TBC // DISTRIBUTOR: THUNDERBIRD RELEASING

Lu Yang's *Brotherhood Of Blades* was one of the martial arts movie highlight releases of this year and now the sequel is heading for our screens in 2018. The new film is a prequel, filling in the backstory of Shen Lian (Chang Chen), the deadly swordsman employed as an assassin by the Imperial court. This time, Shen is drawn into a conspiracy involving an attempt to kill the Emperor, an order to eliminate a famous painter, and the murder of a high-ranking official.

RE: BORN

Sakaguchi Gets Up Close And Painful

OUT: 12 MARCH // DISTRIBUTOR: EUREKA

Japanese action maestro Tak Sakaguchi was tempted out of retirement (he's only in his early 40s!) to star in Yuji Shimomura's *Re: Born*. The plot casts Sakaguchi as an ex-special forces soldier living a quiet life in a rural town when a figure from his past comes looking for revenge. The fight scenes showcase Zero Range Combat, a close-quarters martial arts system developed by Yoshitaka Inagawa focussed on dispatching foes as quickly and lethally as possible. Should be proper mental.





THE HOUSEMAID

Trouble And Temptation
On The Plantation

OUT: 19 FEBRUARY // DISTRIBUTOR: MONTAGE PICTURES

Derek Nguyen's Vietnamese chiller is set in Indo-China during the 1950s when Linh (Kate Nhung) takes a job as a housemaid in the sprawling villa of French plantation owner Sebastien Laurent (Jean-Michel Richaud), who has lost his wife Camille (Svitlana Kovalenko) in mysterious fashion. Linh catches her employer's eye and sparks soon fly, but their affair provokes the wrath of Camille's spirit who is out for blood. And she's not the only vengeful soul back from the dead as everything goes to hell in a hurry.



HANSEL & GRETEL

If You Go Down To The Woods Today

OUT: TBC // DISTRIBUTOR: 88 FILMS

Yim Pil-sung's 2007 chiller *Hansel & Gretel* returns to our screens with a Blu-ray edition from 88 Films. Driving through a forest after dark, Eun-soo (Chun Jung-myung) crashes his car while arguing on the phone with his girlfriend. Lost, he meets a young girl who leads him back to the remote house that she shares with her two siblings deep in the woods. Every time Eun-soo tries to leave, he winds up back at the strange house as he discovers that the children have no intention of letting him go. Yim's film puts a twisted spin on the classic fairy tale from the Brothers Grimm by casting the children as the dangerous predators and adults as their prey.

THE LEGEND OF WUKONG

Eddie Peng's Monkey Business

OUT: 12 MARCH // DISTRIBUTOR: CINE ASIA

The latest film to feature the Monkey King from *Journey To The West*, *The Legend Of Wukong* stars the inescapable Eddie Peng as Sun Wukong in what is effectively an origin story for the mischievous monkey. In Derek Kwok's film, after trying to break into heaven, Wukong ends up on Earth where he must contend with demons, falling in love with Azi (Ni Ni) who happens to be the daughter of his mortal enemy – and there's a village to be saved from destruction.



MONSTER HUNT

Adorable Monster Alert

OUT: JANUARY // DISTRIBUTOR: MANGA ENTERTAINMENT

Until *Wolf Warrior 2* smashed its way to the top of China's box office rankings, the top grossing domestic movie was Raman Hui's *Monster Hunt*. Hui started his career in CG animation working on the Shrek movies and his live action debut is a blend of human actors and CG creatures. The story is set in a world co-habited by humans and monsters and the fate of the heir to the monster kingdom. The cast is led by Jing Boran alongside a mix of mainland and Hong Kong stars including Eric Tsang, Sandra Ng, Jiang Wu and Tang Wei. A sequel is already in the works.



LOVE & OTHER CULTS

Sex And Society

OUT: MARCH // DISTRIBUTOR: THIRD WINDOW FILMS

Third Window Films continue to double up as producers and distributors as they reunite with director Eiji Uchida, from *The Greatful Dead*, for another film exploring life in the underbelly of Japanese society. Ai (Sairi Ito) is raised in a religious cult after being sent there by her frankly bonkers mother. When the cult collapses, Ai has to navigate her way through a society completely alien to her and winds up working in the sex industry where she searches for acceptance. Likewise, Ryota (Kenta Suga) joins a gang as he seeks a sense of purpose.



ANTIPORNO

Happy Birthday Smut!

OUT: APRIL // DISTRIBUTOR: THIRD WINDOW FILMS

2016 was the centennial anniversary of Nikkatsu Studios and to mark the occasion, the head honchos decided to commission a series of films paying homage to the seedy Roman Porn fad of the 1970s. One of these is Sion Sono's *Antiporno* in which Mariko Tsutsui and Ami Tomite play two women working in the pornographic film business, grappling with their own desires and identities in an industry that wants to control and degrade both. Has the director renowned for panty shots made a feminist exploration of sexuality?



THE THIRD MURDER

Kore-eda Goes To Court

OUT: 23 MARCH (CINEMAS) // DISTRIBUTOR: ARROW FILMS

Hirokazu Kore-eda takes a rare break from low-key family dramas with *The Third Murder*. Shigemori (Fukuyama Masaharu) is a lawyer assigned to a case involving a convicted double-murderer Misumi (Yakusho Koji), who has confessed to killing his boss. But Misumi keeps changing his story, and Shigemori suspects the case might not be as clear-cut as it appears even as the lawyer tries to save his client from receiving the death penalty. Hirose Suzu, from Kore-eda's *Our Little Sister*, plays the daughter of the murder victim. *The Third Murder* is new territory for Kore-eda and his courtroom tale will be released in cinemas this spring.

THE WHISPERING STAR / I AM SION SONO

Double Trouble From Japanese Cinema's Enfant Terrible

OUT: 13 FEBRUARY // DISTRIBUTOR: UNIVERSAL PICTURES

This spring will see more from Sion Sono from Third Window Films in the form of a double pack containing *The Whispering Star* and *I Am Sion Sono*. The first is a black and white science fiction story about an android called Yoko (Megumi Kagurazaka) who works for an interplanetary delivery service. Much of the filming took place on sites impacted by the Fukushima disaster as Sono comments on the state of his nation and humankind. The second is a documentary profile of Sono himself that was shot during the production of *The Whispering Star* by director Arata Oshima, the son of Nagisa Oshima.





[ANIME REVIEW]

NORN9 COMPLETE COLLECTION

They're On Cloud Nine!

OUT NOW // MVM // 12 // ROMANCE, SCI-FI // £29.99 (DVD), £34.99 (BLU-RAY) // 300 MINS // 12 EPISODES

PLOT Due to her fire-wielding abilities, Koharu has led a lonely life – until a gigantic floating city arrives to take her away from her troubles! Surrounded by similarly super powered new friends, Koharu will finally be able to learn what it means to be part of a community, as the group tries to solve the mysteries behind both their powers and their new home...

Norn9 originally started life as a visual novel in the *otome* style – the term for a game that, unlike the majority of romance sims, focuses on a female protagonist who finds herself surrounded by eligible suitors. Though right from the outset, it's very clear where the anime adaptation received its inspiration – as everything, from the demure heroine to the gaggle of charming young men that vie for her attentions, is straight from the visual novel playbook.

However, that's not to say that the only element of *Norn9* is a series of romantic plotlines, as there's actually a fairly interesting premise – revolving around an unlikely group of companions with various supernatural abilities, all attempting to figure out their purpose and the reasons for their being thrust into such a bizarre situation. Not to mention, they also need to defend their new home, the floating city-sized globe known as 'Norn', against enemies.

Unfortunately, despite such an intriguing set-up, the execution of *Norn9*'s storyline isn't very well handled. The series isn't bad, as such, but it isn't particularly captivating either.

The main plot points of the series feel a little rushed alongside the development of Koharu's burgeoning relationships with the other members of her crew. In order to weave convincing partnerships, both platonic and romantic, there needs to be a hefty dose of chemistry. However, *Norn9*'s dynamics feel a touch strained at the best of times, and completely nonexistent at worst.

One area where the series does shine (in some cases literally) is the art. The characters are portrayed in a charming shoujo style, which remains true to the designs of the original game while imbuing them with a breath of new life. But the settings and background art is the series' main draw – whether in exterior shots of the majestic floating citadel of Norn, or simple scenes of characters sitting in a room, it's clear that a lot of time and care has gone into making each scene look as good as it can.

Norn9 probably won't hold everyone's attention even for the length of its dozen-episode run, but if you love a romance story with a twist or two, then this will certainly keep you occupied for a few hours.

Norn9 still has a few interesting moments, but what could have been a truly memorable series wastes a lot of its potential while figuring out what kind of show it wants to be, ultimately opting to be jack of all trades and master of none. ●



IF YOU LIKE THIS

Check out the re-release of *Eureka Seven* (and the upcoming brand new movie reboot!) for another skyfaring blend of romance and sci-fi!



[ANIME REVIEW]

DRAGON BALL Z: MOVIE COLLECTION THREE COOLER'S REVENGE & RETURN OF COOLER

26 DECEMBER // MANGA // PG // ACTION, SCI-FI // £24.99 (DVD, BLU-RAY COMBO) // 90 MINS

DESIGN

Although these stories never appeared in the original manga, Cooler and his cadre of minions were still designed by the creator of *Dragon Ball*, Akira Toriyama himself!

PLOT In this double feature of side-stories, a new enemy with an old score to settle comes to Earth looking for revenge! If Goku and the gang thought that alien overlord Frieza was a nasty piece of work, then that's only because they've yet to meet his even badder older brother, Cooler!

In this third pair of restored, remastered, and re-released movies, fans get the chance to relive some of the series' glory days, as Cooler, the tougher sibling to one of the series' most memorable antagonists, enters the fray.

Although these films still look a little rough around the edges at times, there's definitely a lot of classic nostalgic charm to their art and animation – especially in all of the explosive action scenes that you'd rightly expect from a *Dragon Ball* double-bill. A lot of more plot-heavy series can often stumble in fitting a fast-paced story into a single movie, but *Dragon Ball*'s trademark style of getting straight to the fisticuffs serves these titles well – in fact, at only 45-ish minutes a piece, it would actually have been nice if the movies were a bit longer, as viewers will probably feel like each adventure is over almost before it really gets going.

Fans will love adding these bite-size pieces of *Dragon Ball* history to their collection. ●

★★★★★

WORDS BY DAVID WEST



[FILM REVIEW]

MOUNTAINS MAY DEPART

Past, present and future

OUT NOW // ARROW FILMS // PG // DRAMA // THEATRICAL RELEASE // 126 MINS

PLOT Jia Zhangke's drama is told in three chapters set in 1999, 2014 and 2025. It begins with Shen Tao (Tao Zhao) being courted by two suitors, coal miner Liangzi (Liang Jin Dong) and wealthy entrepreneur Zhang Jinsheng (Zhang Yi).

Following 2013's *A Touch Of Sin*, Jia Zhangke continues his dissection of the changing character of China. The first two acts of his triptych are the strongest thanks to the excellent performances of the three leads, particularly Tao Zhao. Shen is introduced leading a group in a dance routine set to the Pet Shop Boy's *Go West*, elegantly establishing Jia's themes about



the impact of western economic liberalism and culture on his homeland. The former concept is articulated in the clash between Jinsheng's budding capitalist and Liangzi's proletariat as they compete for Shen's affections. The concluding chapter is where the film stumbles. In 2025, Jinsheng is living in Australia, forced into exile. His adult son, Dollar (Dong Zijian) has inexplicably forgotten how to speak Mandarin in an awkward comment on the loss of Chinese identity, and begins an affair with an older woman (Sylvia Chang) while pining for his absent mother. It's heavily Freudian and uncharacteristically clumsy.

There is two-thirds of a very strong film here, so it's a shame that Jia loses his grip on the wheel at the end. Nonetheless, the director remains one of China's most insightful commentators. ●

★★★★★

KEY TALENT

The multi-talented Sylvia Chang started acting opposite Wang Yu in Lo Wei's *The Tattooed Dragon* in 1973. In 2015 she wrote, sang and starred in Johnnie To's musical comedy *Office*.



WIN 5 BLU-RAY COPIES OF RONJA, THE ROBBER'S DAUGHTER

THIS ISSUE, WE have five Blu-ray copies of *Ronja, The Robber's Daughter* to give away to lucky NEO readers! Featured last issue, the animated series was animated by Polygon Pictures and produced by Studio Ghibli, with Goro Miyazaki directing.

Like many of Ghibli's most popular films, the TV series takes its inspiration from a children's book – *Ronja rövardotter* by Swedish author Astrid Lindgren. It tells the story of two rival bands of robbers who live in the forest, and Ronja, a young girl who is daughter to one of their chieftains. As she grows up, she becomes friends with the son of her father's enemy, and the two clans are forever changed. But change comes with a price – and no story worth watching was ever smooth sailing!

The Blu-ray and DVD are out now, priced £32.99 and £24.99 respectively. The release consists of 26 episodes across four discs, and extras include an interview with Goro Miyazaki, a press conference, and a five part 'Making Of' documentary.

If you want to win a copy of *Ronja, The Robber's Daughter* on Blu-ray, all you have to do is answer the following question correctly to be entered into our prize draw.

WHO DIRECTED RONJA, THE ROBBER'S DAUGHTER?

A) HAYAO MIYAZAKI B) GORO MIYAZAKI C) ISAO TAKAHATA

You can enter by emailing your answer along with your name and address to neomagcomp@gmail.com, with the subject header NEO 171 Ronja, The Robber's Daughter competition. Alternatively, you can enter by sending the correct answer on the back of a postcard, along with your address, to the Uncooked Media editorial address printed on page 084. Closing date: 18 January

TERMS AND CONDITIONS

No correspondence will be entered into. No employees of Uncooked Media or the companies providing the prizes may enter. No cash alternative is offered to these prizes. Entries are only valid if they reach us by the closure date. Multiple entries will be disregarded. The publisher's decision is final. Good luck!





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NEO VAULT: CLASSICS REDISCOVERED

A SIMPLE LIFE

Once dismissed as just a pretty face, Andy Lau dazzled critics and audiences in Ann Hui and Roger Lee's ode to a housekeeper.

Roger Lee is a producer and financier in the Hong Kong movie business, where he's been involved with hits including John Woo's *Red Cliff* and Tsui Hark's *Once Upon A Time In China*. *A Simple Life*, from 2011, is based on Lee's personal experience of his lifelong relationship with his ah-ma.

The role of ah-ma doesn't have a precise western analogy; she's a housekeeper, a cook, a child-carer and much more besides. In director Ann Hui's drama, Andy Lau plays Roger and Deannie Yip plays Ah Tao, his ah-ma. Their near perfect performances won Best Actor and Best Actress at both the Hong Kong Film Awards and the Golden Horse Awards.

Director Ann Hui cast Lau against type; the superstar usually plays suave, dashing heroes in blockbusters like *Detective Dee: Mystery Of The Phantom Flame* and *Three Kingdoms: Resurrection Of The Dragon*. But as Roger he's so quiet and unassuming that, in a recurring in-joke since Lau is one of the most recognisable men in East Asia, he is frequently mistaken for other people, including a cab driver and an air-conditioning repairman.

"I knew he could do it because I've always felt that he's a very good actor," director Hui told NEO when asked about Lau's casting. "It's just that he's so successful and he looks so posh that people thought he couldn't act."

The chemistry between the two leads feels completely natural which might have something to do with the fact that Yip is Lau's godmother in real life. The film features cameos from some of the biggest names in Hong Kong cinema. Anthony Wong plays the owner of the care home that Ah Tao moves into, while in one scene Roger goes out for dinner with Sammo Hung and Tsui Hark, both playing themselves. "I was quite surprised they agreed," says Hui. "When I was shooting the scene, I kept laughing because the level of reality in that scene is very mixed. Sammo is playing Sammo, Tsui Hark is playing Tsui Hark but Andy is playing a producer, he is not playing himself. What is reality? It was very funny."

HONG KONG FAMILIES

Film producer Roger shares his expensive Hong Kong apartment with the elderly ah-ma Ah Tao. She's been caring for him since he was a child and even in adulthood she still maintains and runs the household, takes care of his laundry and prepares all his meals. It's something they both take for granted until Ah Tao suffers a debilitating stroke and abruptly finds she can no longer look after Roger or herself. He desperately wants to re-pay the

kindness and affection she has shown him over the decades, but Ah Tao is determined not to be a burden and insists on moving into a care home.

A Simple Life is first and foremost a study of these two characters. Ann Hui's direction avoids melodrama and instead brings Roger and Ah Tao vividly to life through the small, intimate details of their lives. Before the stroke, Ah Tao's daily routine is all about meeting Roger's needs. She knows where to buy the best ingredients for her cooking and, in a telling scene that reveals just how much they are both completely settled into this life, Roger accepts the meal that Ah Tao has spent hours preparing without so much as a word. There's a touching moment when he helps her pack up her belongings only to realise that all of her photographs and keepsakes involve him.

With Roger's own relatives scattered to the winds and Ah Tao having devoted her life to raising a child not her own, they've become a family without either of them ever articulating their deep bond. An intensely powerful ode from Roger Lee to the woman who quietly loved him like a son, *A Simple Life* is a beautiful film and Deannie Yip's superb performance is sure to break even the hardest of hearts.



THE KING OF HONG KONG



In 2005, Andy Lau was named Hong Kong's top box office star of the past decade. Taken as a group, his films had out-grossed those of Stephen Chow and Jackie Chan. *Infernal Affairs*, from 2002, is a classic crime thriller and a fantastic watch.



In addition to his success onscreen, Lau enjoys a massive pop career and he sang at the opening of the 2008 Paralympics in Beijing. Zhang Yimou's arthouse martial arts film *House Of Flying Daggers* helped introduce him to western audiences.



PERSONAL EXPERIENCE

Like Roger Lee, Ann Hui grew up with an ah-ma in the house who looked after her. "I've always wanted to shoot a story about an old servant, because I had one at home but she was fired by my mum after 20 years," says Hui.

"She came back and visited us after that and gave us presents. It was really strange. She's that kind of person. I'm also middle-aged and not married and working in the film industry so I completely know what Roger is about. Their relationship is what Roger told me and I found that completely understandable." That slice of realism no doubt added to the finished product.



A CINEMA LIFE

Deannie Yip began her acting career with minor roles in the late 1970s but she's likely best known to western audiences for her role in *Dragons Forever* alongside Jackie Chan, Sammo Hung and Yuen Biao. She worked with Stephen Chow in *Fight Back To School II* and co-starred with her godson Andy Lau in the 1991 romantic comedy *Dances With Dragon* for director Wong Jing. In 2017 the actress reunited with director Ann Hui for the drama *Our Time Will Come* about the Hong Kong resistance to the Japanese occupation during World War II, featuring Eddie Peng and Wallace Huo.

1. Ann Hui on set with Deannie Yip and Andy Lau, who she says looks "so posh". 2. No, no, don't worry about coming to visit. I'll just sit here, by myself. All Alone. Cold. Hungry. 3. The little, joy-filled moments in life are the ones to treasure.



Lau may be famed for his good looks, but he's proven a versatile and gifted actor. In Derek Yee's fantastic crime thriller *Protégé*, Lau plays the head of a heroin cartel grooming Daniel Wu's undercover cop to be his successor.



Returning to the role of the corrupt police officer Lee Rock, which he first played in 1991, Andy Lau scored big at the Hong Kong box office in 2017 when he teamed up with Donnie Yen for *Chasing The Dragon* (see our review on page 082).

COSPLAY STAR

Lara Croft – Christmas style

TASHA COSPLAY UK

Photography by Tracey Devlin
www.jdphoto.biz/CP1

URLs

- facebook.com/tashacosplaymackenzie
- twitter.com/tashacosplay
- Instagram.com/tashacosplayuk

Character

I have always been a massive gamer and Lara Croft was a classic favourite of mine: the original bad-ass female!

Christmas

I had an idea to make an Xmas version in homage to her original look and I wanted to try to keep it as authentic as possible, but still with a real Christmas vibe. Hopefully I succeeded!

Setting

We did this shoot in the Natural Light Spaces (www.naturallightspaces.co.uk) as not only is it a great studio set up, but they had a 16ft Christmas tree up which was perfect for this look.

Costume

I used the bits I had already made for my original version (gloves, holsters, belt, socks) and then for this version I made the hat, top, and added fur to wrists. I played the games for years and I have cosplayed Lara Croft quite a few times so can now pose quite easily as her.







[GAME REVIEW]

XENOBLADE CHRONICLES 2

Nia Perfection

OUT NOW // ANIME LIMITED // CERT 12 // JRPG // £49.99 (SWITCH)
// PUBLISHER NINTENDO // DEVELOPER MONOLITH SOFT

PLOT After forming a bond with a humanised weapon – the Blade Pyra – a young salvager named Rex sets off on an epic journey with allies Nia and Tora to save humanity from extinction and return to the promised land of Elysium, which lies atop the colossal World Tree.

MINIGAME

Need a break from adventuring? *Xenoblade Chronicles 2* also includes *Tiger! Tiger!* an addictive NES-style salvaging minigame, which can earn you items and treasures to use on your main quest.

After the more exploration-focused open world adventuring of *Xenoblade Chronicles X*, the series returns to its story-driven roots and cast of likeable characters, each with their own strengths, agendas and secrets. There's something captivating about the idea of roaming on the backs of enormous beasts (named Titans); and the promise of eventually reaching the World Tree was enough to keep us hooked during our 70+ hour play time. If you want to see everything the game has to offer, however, that number could easily reach into the hundreds.

The course of your adventure sees Rex and co. journeying on top of and within various living Titans, from the grassy plains of Gormott to the industrialised wasteland of Mor Ardain, each area offering its own developments in story, character and items, and feeling fully alive in terms of local residents and indigenous wildlife. *Xenoblade's* tradition of mixing the occasional high-level enemy in with the usual

beasts returns in 2, and serves as a great way to tease the player about what they will be able to eventually take down, given enough experience.

Despite the multi-layered battle system initially looking a little off-putting in previews, the truth is we were soon effortlessly racking up awesome combos when engaging with enemies. This is definitely among the most satisfying combat we've experienced in an RPG, and we hope it stays for future instalments. It's just a shame, however, that tutorials cannot be accessed again after their first appearance, as there's quite a lot thrown at you at times.

Another small complaint could be levelled at the confusing map system, which can make it surprisingly difficult at times to know exactly where you're going. This is something that, thanks to a floating orb you could follow to get to your objective, *X* managed to nail, and it's a shame some of our time in 2 was spent aimlessly wandering around trying to work out where to go.

Despite this, however, we thoroughly enjoyed our time with *Xenoblade Chronicles 2*, from the excellent world building and combat to the first rate soundtrack and surprisingly varied voice cast – straight-talking sidekick Nia's Welsh accent was a particular favourite of ours! A great end to what has undoubtedly been a strong first year for Nintendo's new home console.

JRPG fans do not want to give this one a miss. *Xenoblade Chronicles 2* is another strong entry in the franchise – a deep adventure with a high level of party customisation, but simple enough for newcomers to the genre to enjoy. ●

★★★★★

third window films present

ANIMERAMA

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千夜一夜物語

CLEOPATRA クレオパトラ

BOTH FILMS
OUT FOR THE
FIRST TIME EVER
ON BLURAY!
SPRING 2018



thirdwindowfilms.com



[FILM REVIEW]

TOKYO GHOUL

Who are the real monsters?

31 JANUARY // ANIME LTD // 15 // HORROR // THEATRICAL RELEASE
// 120 MINS

PLOT After being attacked and nearly killed by a ghoul, Ken Kaneki (Masataka Kubota) is saved by a transplant of organs from his assailant. Afterwards, he discovers that food repulses him and he hungers for human flesh, but he finds a sanctuary in Anteiku, a café run by and for ghouls.

Helmed by a relatively unknown director, Kentaro Hagiwara, *Tokyo Ghoul* stays faithful to the spirit of the anime whilst trimming and simplifying the plot of the first series. The main theme concerns the ghouls' right to exist, despite their need to eat people. The kindly ghouls of Anteiku try to navigate this moral dilemma by munching on the bodies of suicide victims, while the

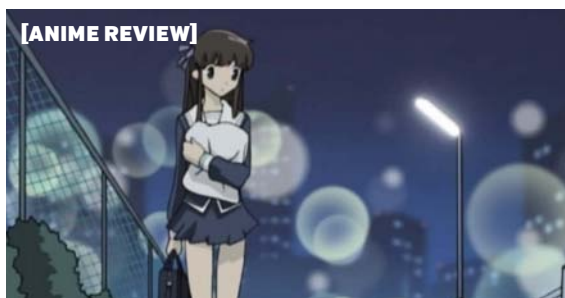
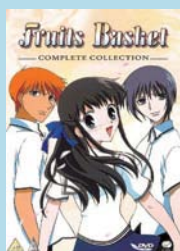
script makes it abundantly clear that humans can be thoroughly monstrous themselves. The screenplay neglects to explain where ghouls come from, which is frustrating, but it jumps into the plot quickly, setting Kaneki and fellow ghoul Touka (Fumika Shimizu) against Amon (Nobuyuki Suzuki) and the sadistic Mado (Yo Oizumi), two ruthless government agents hunting their kind. Action scenes hit hard and are impressively gory, although Amon's anti-ghoul weapon looks like a giant kebab and the CG work is mixed. Kubota is very good at portraying Kaneki's awkwardness, while Shimizu impresses as the tough as nails Touka.

There are parallels between *Tokyo Ghoul* and the *Twilight Saga* – both feature supernatural creatures who don't hunt humans – but Hagiwara's film is way more violent. Despite favouring action over character, it's a stronger anime adaptation than the AOT movies. ●

★★★★☆

IF YOU LIKE THIS

For more Japanese horror-action try *Versus*. Or, *Tokyo Gore Police* is gonzo-bonkers, while *Chanbara Beauty* features Eri Otoguro fighting zombies in a bikini.



[ANIME REVIEW]

FRUITS BASKET

An ap-peel-ing shoujo!

08 JANUARY // MVM ENTERTAINMENT // PG // COMEDY, FANTASY, ROMANCE, SHOUJO // £29.99 (DVD) // 650 MINS // 26 EPISODES

PLOT The Sohma family has a terrible curse – when they're touched by a member of the opposite sex, they transform into an animal based on one of the Chinese Zodiac animals! Will Tohru Honda keep the Sohma family's secret?

Fruits Basket may look like your ordinary shoujo if you were to pick it up in a store, although you'll quickly come to learn that it's anything but! When Tohru Honda's mother dies in an accident, she finds herself living alone in a tent in the woods. She's soon invited to live with the mysterious Sohma family, where her life is turned upside-down.



WORDS BY MITCHELL LINEHAM

Rife with over-the-top humour and outlandish situations, Honda's touch turns the home's inhabitants into Chinese Zodiac animals, but at least she doesn't live in a tent anymore!

One of Studio DEEN's most easily recognised works, *Fruits Basket* is colourful and undeniably shoujo, featuring big eyes, sharp faces and cute animals aplenty. The story is sweetly comedic, and easily provides plenty of laughs and entertainment. Its 26 episodes are mostly upbeat, but its meaningful, and sometimes emotional, plot leaves you with plenty to mull over once the final credits roll.

Fruits Basket is fondly remembered with good reason. It's a classic shoujo with solid storytelling, great characters and brilliant presentation. If you're looking to experience a piece of anime history, this is an excellent choice. ●

★★★★☆

MANGA

Fruits Basket is based on a 23-volume manga which ran for eight years, and it features a whopping 136 chapters.



[FILM REVIEW]

SHIN GODZILLA

Meetings, bloody meetings

OUT NOW // MANGA ENTERTAINMENT // 12 // KAIJU // £17.99 (DVD),
£19.99 (BLU-RAY) // 120 MINS

PLOT When a huge radioactive creature emerges from the ocean and heads inland, cleaving a path of destruction through Japan, government officials are slow to respond. But when the US threatens to drop an atomic bomb on the monster in the middle of Tokyo, the Japanese government must find an alternative.

Shinji Higuchi and Hideaki Anno take the helm of the long-awaited Toho studios reboot of *Godzilla*. The directors make the bold choice to hit the reset button and start from scratch, in more ways than one. Not only does the story discount any previous appearances of Godzilla, including the 1954 original, but when the creature first emerges it's still in a semi-developed state. Crawling on its belly and unable to stand upright, this proto-Godzilla is not the most impressive specimen in the franchise's history. Fortunately, the monster soon evolves into a more familiar profile, although there are some new abilities on display, including anti-aircraft proton beams fired from Godzilla's dorsal fins.

The film is at its most exciting whenever there's a rampage underway, but that makes up remarkably little of the running time. Instead, the story follows numerous indiscernible government officials scurrying about from meeting to

meeting and committee to committee trying to figure out the right protocol for responding to a giant monster attack. It's clearly a comment on how slow the government was to react to the nuclear disaster in Fukushima. The officials in charge seem more worried about the falling value of the Yen and the cost to the economy than citizen's lives, but these scenes do drag on. "So much red tape. Every action requires a meeting," complains one minion, all too accurately.

There are fleeting dashes of humour – "My noodles have gone soggy. I knew this job wouldn't be easy," bemoans the new Prime Minister – and it's a shame the overall tone is resolutely po-faced.

Anno and Higuchi make several unusual visual choices. The film appears to be shot on video often using available lighting and the endless scenes of meetings and people staring at computer screens look flat and a little dull. The directors have a bizarre need to caption everything, from key locations and each district to quake beneath Godzilla's feet, right down to every piece of military hardware deployed to halt his advance. This rapidly becomes overkill – it doesn't enhance the narrative to know what model of helicopter is coming to collect the Prime Minister or which freeway just got stomped on...

Credit to Anno and Higuchi for bringing a fresh perspective to a franchise that started life in 1954, but the cheap-looking cinematography, cluttered cast and endless captions blunt the impact of Godzilla's return. Next time, fewer meetings, more mayhem please. ●



EXTRAS

The two-disc DVD release, reviewed here, includes the film with the original Japanese dialogue and an English-dubbed version, plus over an hour of visual effects demos and test shoots.



[ANIME REVIEW]

SWORD OF THE STRANGER

Brutal and action-packed

OUT NOW // ANIME LIMITED // 15 // ACTION, HISTORICAL, SAMURAI // £34.99 (BLU-RAY) // 103 MINS

PLOT The action takes place during the Sengoku period in Japan, and follows young thief Kotaro and his dog Tobimaru. They find themselves running for their lives when China's Ming Dynasty sends assassins to kill them both for unknown reasons.

Sword of the Stranger clocks in at a little under two hours, but it's a thrilling journey which never slows down. Violence and brutality is rampant, with people being dismembered, stabbed and shot, so this isn't a movie for the weak of heart. Although the violence may be gratuitous, it's never used solely to shock or repulse.

Young Kotaro and his dog Tobimaru make for a delightful pair, and seeing Kotaro grow throughout the course of the movie is a rewarding experience – at the beginning of the movie he's bratty and stubborn, but he learns about the value of friendship due to his adventure with his hired bodyguard, No Name. No Name doesn't clearly remember his past, but seeing how he interacts with Kotaro, especially as he wanted nothing to do with him, makes for engaging viewing. The characters steal the show here, and much of it is thanks to Tomoya Nagase's and Yuuri Chinen's fantastic performances.

There are English, Japanese and French voice-overs, but the Japanese version is the most fulfilling thanks to its blend of Japanese, Chinese and English-speaking characters. This element is lost in the dubbed versions. Members of Japan and China are at war with each other, and it's nothing short of odd to see the Japanese characters speaking English whilst the Chinese characters still speak Chinese.

Studio Bones' work on *Sword of the Stranger* is terrific, and it hasn't lost its shine in the ten years that the movie has been out. The violence isn't censored in any way, with all the action taking place on-screen – and the effects are painfully realistic, with vomit and blood in abundance while wounded characters slowly succumb to their fatal wounds. It's heavy-hitting stuff, and there's a painstaking level of detail being used for both the main and background characters. There are no punches pulled when it comes to depicting the depth of destruction wrought by the battles in the story.

There are a handful of interesting extras on the disc, including a making of, interviews with the two leading Japanese voice-actors, trailers and more, making this edition a great way to get a deeper insight into the movie. And considering that *Sword of the Stranger* more than lives up to the hype that surrounded its release back in 2007, this is one title that's definitely worth adding to your collection.

***Sword of the Stranger* is a fantastic historical-action movie with outstanding performances, brilliant animation and a rich narrative. Now ten years old, it finally has its chance to shine in the west. ●**



VOICE ACTOR

Sword of the Stranger marks popular Japanese actor and musician Tomoya Nagase's first time voice-acting for an animated work.



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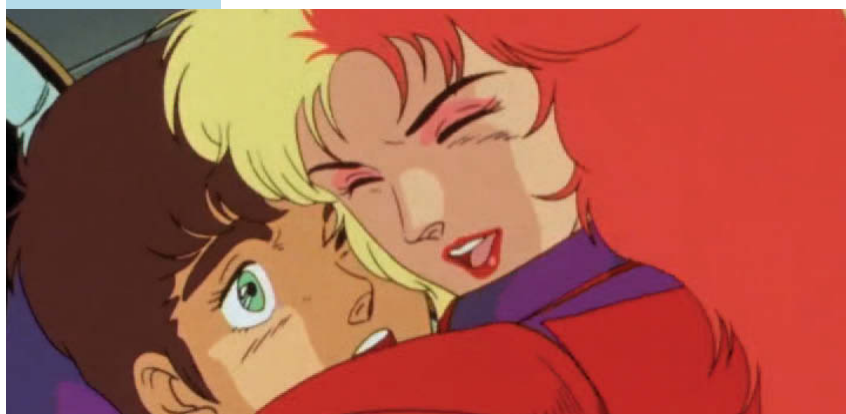
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[ANIME REVIEW]

MOBILE SUIT GUNDAM ZZ PART TWO

Suit up, pilots!

08 JANUARY // ANIME LIMITED // 12 // SCI-FI, DRAMA, COMEDY //
£59.99 (BLU-RAY) // 550 MINS // 47 EPISODES

SEQUEL

This is a direct sequel to *Zeta Gundam*, and the ZZ in *Mobile Suit Gundam ZZ* indicates "Double Zeta".

PLOT When Haman Karn, the leader of Neo Zeon, attacks Earth, Judau Ashta launches a counter-attack to stop Haman and to save his sister, Leina. The adventure Judau and his friends go on shows them the suffering which Neo Zeon has caused, and their desire to stop them grows ever stronger.

Mobile Suit Gundam ZZ Part Two continues the story which began in the first part, and it uses its hefty allotment of episodes to get down to the real meat of the story. It's well-paced and funny, and the large cast of characters, and their banter, never

grows old. It's light on clichés, and heavy on development both narratively and in characterisation.

ZZ is one of the earliest *Gundam* anime, and one of the most notable in the long-running series. Sunrise hoped to have this be lighter in tone compared to the heavier *Zeta*, but its second half proves that they couldn't keep away from the drama. This means that there's an inconsistency in tone, but the overall story is engaging enough to prevent it from being a pressing issue.

Although ZZ manages to bring together a lot of the elements which makes *Gundam* popular, including memorable character and mech designs, it's not quite the best in the franchise – but there's a lot here to like.

An enticing classic which should please *Gundam* fans. ●

★★★★★

[MANGA REVIEWS]



© Yoshitoki Oima

TO YOUR ETERNITY

OUT NOW // PUBLISHER KODANSHA COMICS // 13+ // £10.99 // AUTHOR
YOSHITOKI OIMA

An alien lands on a planet and melts into a new form; that of the dying wolf who stumbles across it... A young orphan fends for himself in a post-apocalyptic world, optimistically waiting for the return of those who abandoned him years ago. The orphan and the alien (wearing the form of the child's now-dead pet) unite, and the pair set out on a heart-breakingly doomed mission. The alien form morphs once more and encounters a young girl sent by her tribe to be sacrificed to the gods... The least spoiled the better.

One of a kind – mystery, tragedy, a yearning for discovery... This manga will have you grasping for the next volume just to discover more about our enigmatic protagonist. ●

★★★★★



© Megumi Morino

WAKE UP, SLEEPING BEAUTY

OUT NOW // PUBLISHER KODANSHA COMICS // CERT 13+ // £10.99 //
AUTHOR MEGUMI MORINO

Tetsu Mitsato tries to make his way in the world to prove to his dad that he's got what it takes to enter the workforce. Slaving away for the family cleaning business, he gets a placement at a rich lady's house – and the rumours are that her daughter lives like a recluse in a small cottage at the back of the garden, quarantined due to her poor health. One day, Tetsu meets her by chance, and at first, she doesn't seem as mysterious as she's made out to be... However, the more Tetsu speaks to her, the more she reveals about herself – and it turns out there's a very strange reason why she's not supposed to leave the house.

An off-beat romantic manga with a mysterious love interest and a fascinating twist. ●

★★★★★

WORDS BY ANDREW OSMOND

NEO RELEASE ROUND-UP

THE STATE OF THE UK MARKET THIS MONTH

IT'S A QUIET start of the year for the UK anime industry – we like to picture it as a hibernating Totoro, snoring under the snow on some Japanese mountain. Let's face it, with the ton of releases in 2017, on Blu-ray, DVD and a fantastic number for cinema, it deserves a snooze. Still, there are a few titles on the calendar...

As well as a Collector's Blu-ray of *Fruits Basket* on 8 January (see the review on page 074), MVM is releasing another title for the old-school crowd – the first two OVA seasons of *Tenchi Muyo*, making 13 episodes in total. A Collector's combo edition came out previously, but now it's being released in separate Blu-ray and DVD editions on 5 February.

The episodes were originally released in Japan from 1993 to 1996. Along with *Evangelion*, they were some of the first serialised anime to have a home release in Britain, back in the days when a tape would contain an amazing *two episodes*, dubbed only! If you've never heard of *Tenchi Muyo*, it's often credited as one of the first (and most likable) "harem" anime, in which the title boy Tenchi is surrounded by a bevy of lovely females from outer space. Yes, there was a time when that was new in anime.

For fans still chasing one of the harem show's weirder (and naughtier) 21st century specimens, *Monster Musume* is now scheduled by MVM for 22 January – this is the Collector's Combi including Blu-rays, DVD and a soundtrack CD. We never knew snake girls were so darned elusive...

Meanwhile, the magic girl series *Matoi the Sacred Slayer* is due on both Blu-ray and DVD on 15 January. If you're wondering about *GATE*, that interdimensional actioner is now due on 19 February.

Over to Manga Entertainment, where the schedule is largely dominated by old and new *Dragon Ball*. You'll find a review of the third *Dragon Ball Z Movie Collection* this issue over on page 065; that'll be a Blu-ray / DVD combo on Boxing Day (Merry Christmas!). The fourth film collection, also a combo, will come out on 15 January, and the fifth collection on 12 February. Meanwhile, the second volume of the new



1. Make your New Year's resolution to watch *Matoi the Sacred Slayer*. Or learn a new language. 2. *Monster Musume*... still not out yet. 3. *Summer Wars*, the perfect movie to watch on 15 January. 4. If you haven't seen *Tenchi Muyo* yet, you have no taste. Or you're under the age of 30.

Dragon Ball Super TV show is due on Blu-ray and DVD on 29 January.

A couple of the new Blu-ray editions of Mamoru Hosoda films were delayed, with *The Girl Who Leapt Through Time* going back to Boxing Day, and *Summer Wars* to 15 January. And just after its cinema release, *Pokémon: I Choose You* hits DVD on 12 February. ●

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1



[FILM REVIEW]

CHASING THE DRAGON

Donnie Yen swaps kung fu for crime

22 JANUARY // WELL GO USA // CERT 15 // THRILLER // PRICE TBC // 128 MINS

PLOT In the 1960s, Hong Kong is rife with corruption. As gangsters battle over the heroin trade, bent cops line their own pockets. Ng Sai Ho (Donnie Yen) is a drug dealer fighting for his slice of the cake, while Lee Rock (Andy Lau) climbs the ranks of the police force.

Co-directed by the legendary king of schlock Wong Jing and cinematographer Jason Kwan, *Chasing The Dragon* brings together two of Hong Kong's biggest stars to play a pair of the most notorious crooks from Hong Kong history.

However, to describe the film as a biography of either figure would be generous indeed. This is very much a fictional crime thriller that, much like the *Ip Man* films that made Yen a superstar, treats history merely as the starting point for weaving a good yarn.

Ng Sai Ho, or Crippled Ho as he was known because of his limp, was the city's top heroin dealer in the early 1970s, while Lee Rock was a senior policeman who ultimately had to flee to Canada to avoid arrest by the ICAC – the Independent Commission Against Corruption.

Both men have been the subject of previous movies – Ray Lui played Crippled Ho in Poon Man-Kit's 1991 film *To Be Number One*, while Andy Lau has previously portrayed Lee in a pair of films, simply titled *Lee Rock* and *Lee Rock II*, for director Lau Kwok-Cheung in 1991.

What's different this time is that Wong and Kwan's film casts both men as heroes taking on their evil colonial British rulers, embodied by the foul-mouthed and violent Superintendent Hunter (Bryan Larkin).

In a similar manner to John Woo's gangster epics, the script makes a clear distinction between the good characters, those who are loyal to their sworn brothers, and the villains who only serve their own greed. Ho and Lee fall squarely into the loyal bracket, despite the fact one is a drug dealer and the other is getting rich off the kickbacks from that dark trade.

There's even a shameless attempt to mollify any doubts the viewer may have about Ho's personality by having him try to keep his younger brother off heroin while loudly raging against what an evil drug it is. Further to that, Ho lives by the phrase, "Life or death, poverty or riches; it's all destined," so presumably being a fabulously rich drug dealer is just his destiny and he shouldn't be judged too harshly.

The other manner in which *Chasing The Dragon* recalls the heyday of Woo's Triad films is the fact that this is very much a boys' club. Female characters are kept firmly in the background and only exist to further the heroes' journeys.

KEY TALENT

Chasing The Dragon is Jason Kwan's second film as director, but as a cinematographer his credits include Pang Ho-Cheung's *Vulgaria*, and *Young Bruce Lee* from Raymond Yip and Manfred Wong.



Even the death of Ho's first wife is played purely to create sympathy for the drug dealer for his loss – the viewer knows nothing of the wife at all, she's a tragic plot beat.

The anti-British angle of the screenplay seems more targeted to appeal to viewers on the mainland than in Hong Kong itself. "Never touch the Brits," Lee warns Ho in an early scene, but inevitably events force both men

"CHASING THE DRAGON PROVES YEN CAN CUT IT AS A LEADING MAN WITHOUT NEEDING TO RELY ON HIS MARTIAL ARTS."

to choose sides – for or against Hunter and his clique of British heavies.

"You think you own Hong Kong?" bellows Ho when he confronts his nemesis, "It's ours!" That's a sentiment sure to play well in Beijing.

Hunter may be the main antagonist, but he's not the only villain. In his rise to the top, Ho has to contend with Triad boss Chubby (Ben Ng) who, unlike the 'good' gangsters, is completely lacking in loyalty and any notion of brotherhood. Whilst this is not a martial arts film, which is an interesting change of pace for Donnie Yen, *Chasing The Dragon* is not short on action including a fantastic set piece when Lee and Ho have to fight their way through Kowloon's infamous

Walled City while pursued by angry Triad members. Jason Kwan's camerawork really enhances the sense of urgency and chaos as the two hurtle through the labyrinthine back alleys. Smaller in scale but no less exciting is the punch-up between Ho and one of Chubby's men (played by Phillip Ng) as they demolish a restaurant by smashing each other through all the available furnishings.

Yen will likely always be associated with his portrayal of Ip Man, particularly with a fourth film in the works, but this is amongst his strongest performances – although his age is starting to show now that he's entered his 50s, and he's obviously older than the character he plays in the early scenes. Even when he's living the good life, there's still a rough around the edges quality to Crippled Ho, who came to Hong Kong as an illegal immigrant from Chaozhou.

Returning to the role of Lee Rock, the apparently ageless Andy Lau plays him as the epitome of cool, with his sharp suits, slick hair, and an imperturbable sense of constantly being in control. There's good support from Kent Cheng as Lee's right-hand man, plus real-life Triad member and actor Chan Wai-Man has a brief cameo for added authenticity.

Wong Jing has directed his share of turkeys, but this isn't one of them. Yen and Lau are on top form, while the brawls and shoot outs burst with energy. It might be a very rose-tinted view of two hardened criminals, but *Chasing The Dragon* is a Hong Kong gangster classic. ●

★★★★★

1. Don't look behind you, Andy, but somehow a woman has snuck into this story. **2.** Not the cavalry they were expecting. **3.** Another quiet night out for Ho and the boys in Hong Kong... **4.** Donnie Yen enjoys his own *Scarface* moment as Crippled Ho.

TRIVIA

The corruption displayed in *Chasing The Dragon* has a factual basis. When the ICAC was founded in 1974, an estimated 35% of Hong Kong cops were Triad members or affiliates.

NEXT ISSUE

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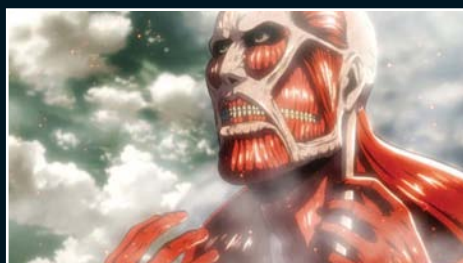
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MANGA EXTRACT

THE SONG COLLECTOR

By Rebecca Burgess

THIS MONTH, WE have an extract from Rebecca Burgess' *The Song Collector*, her brand new series.

"Set during WWI, *The Song Collector* follows two scholars as they travel across Britain in order to record and preserve folk songs," she told us. "As the effects of The Great War worsen, the two friends learn to confront and tackle the personal problems they are both hiding from."

In this extract, Burgess tells us, "The two main characters meet for the first time – they don't get along right away! Theodore is very precious about his big song collecting project, but he isn't flexible or very good at talking to people. (In today's terms, he would be someone who is on the autism spectrum, but this is not mentioned within the comic itself because of the time period.)

"So, the university funding his project asks Shavrya – someone who is very good with people and down to earth – to work with Theodore. In this opening chapter, Theo begrudgingly agrees to have Shavrya join the project. In the end they become good friends though!"

Burgess also told us more about the unusual setting she picked for her story: "I wanted the comic to be set just before and then during The Great War to parallel with the main characters' stories. Theo suffers from OCD and some intense phobias, he is also very anxious about change and new things. Shavrya struggles with depression and feels very bad when she can't help people.

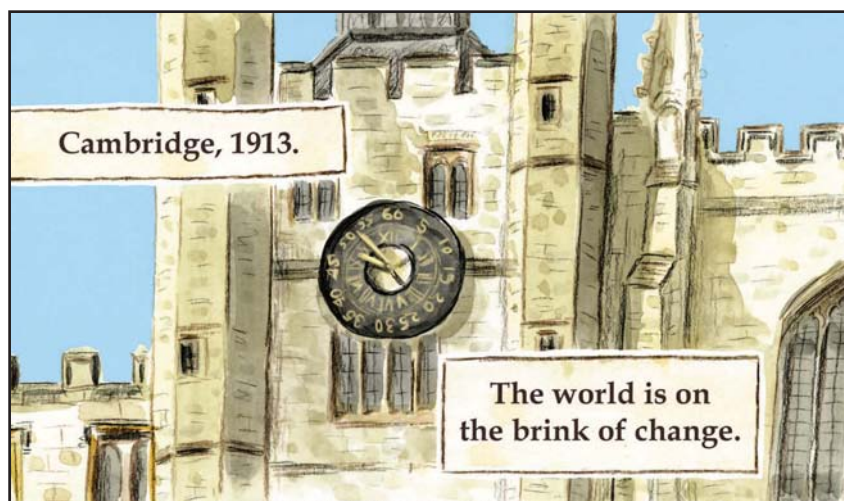
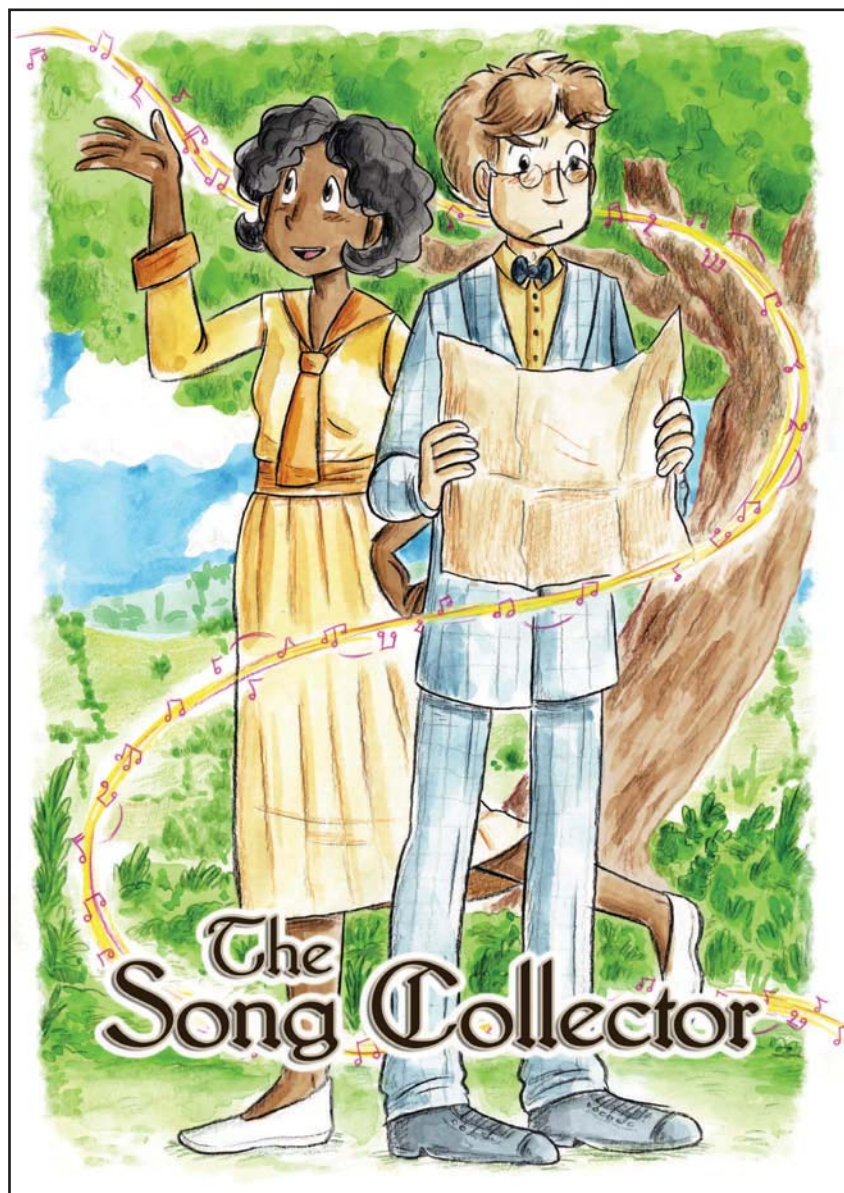
"WWI brought about a lot of change and stress for Britain as a whole. I wanted it to be the catalyst that emphasised the characters' personal problems. The collecting of folk songs also emphasises this; it's something a lot of people did around that time, in an attempt to preserve things that were changing very quickly."

We asked her to share more about her inspirations and the themes she likes to include in her work. "I originally came up with this back in 2010 when I was reading up a lot about Cecil Sharp, a famous song archivist from around the same time period. He's the most famous of a group of people who did this back then, there's a big folk song museum in London named after him too!

"I also wanted to talk about my personal issues regards mental health through Theo, who is directly based on me and how I feel a lot of the time. It's a lot less scary to tackle that sort of thing through fictional characters than to be direct. I also wanted to have a period drama that showed some diversity that definitely existed back then but isn't often shown in historical fiction; hence the two main characters are a person of colour and a person with autism.

"I generally tackle different messages in each comic I make," she told us, after we asked about whether she felt there was a particular message that ran through her body of work. "But I do seem to do more stories set in history or inspired by music. This is the second comic I've done set during WWI and involving music for example. I just like the clothes designs from that time!"

Read Burgess' comics for free online at <https://tapas.io/theorah>, including *Strangers & Friends*, previously featured in NEO!



Cambridge, 1913.

The world is on
the brink of change.

The Great War
will begin in just
a year's time.

It will bring
with it a whole
new way of life,
the world will
never be
the same again.

But, there are always
people who try to resist
what they can't control...

Hello,
Shravya,
come in!

Morning
Henry!

Sorry for
arriving a bit
early...

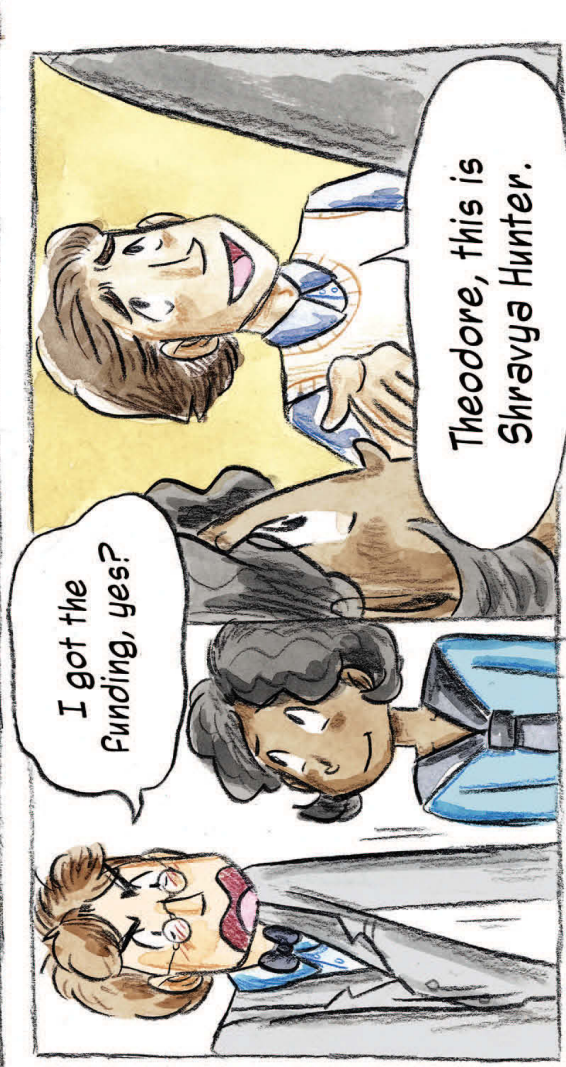
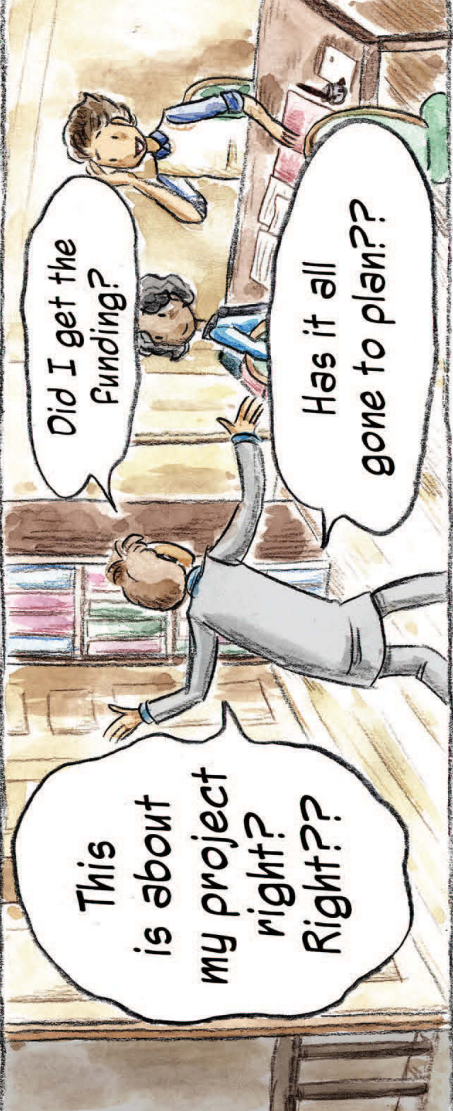
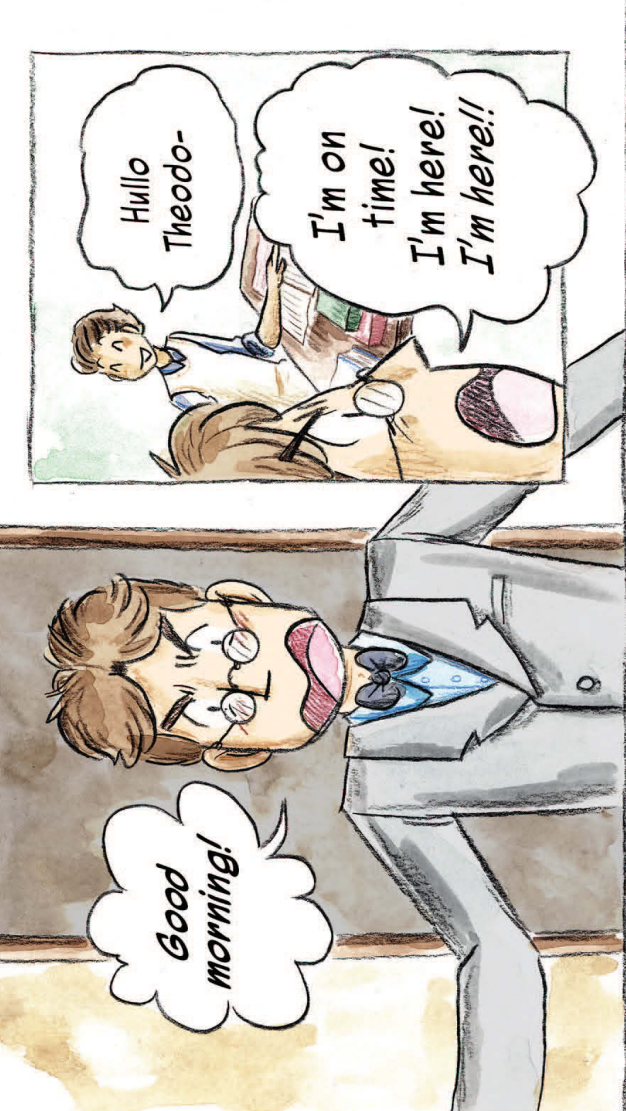
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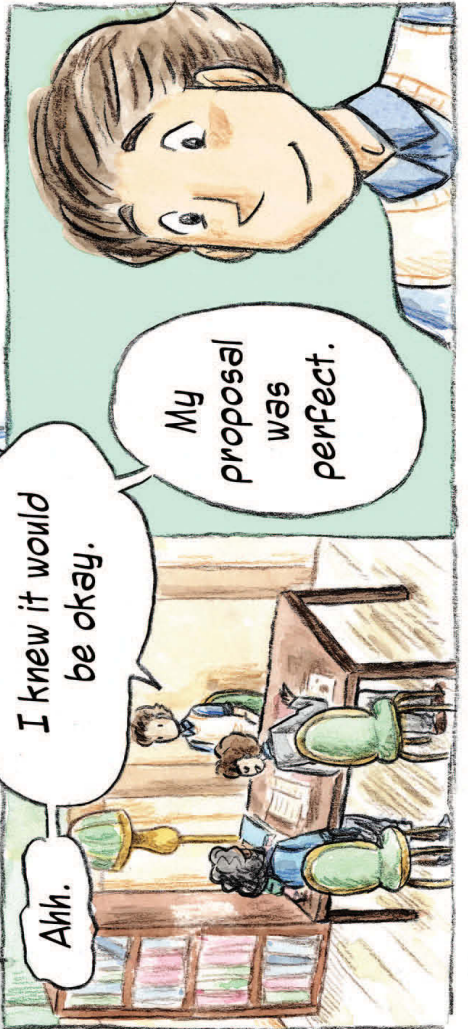
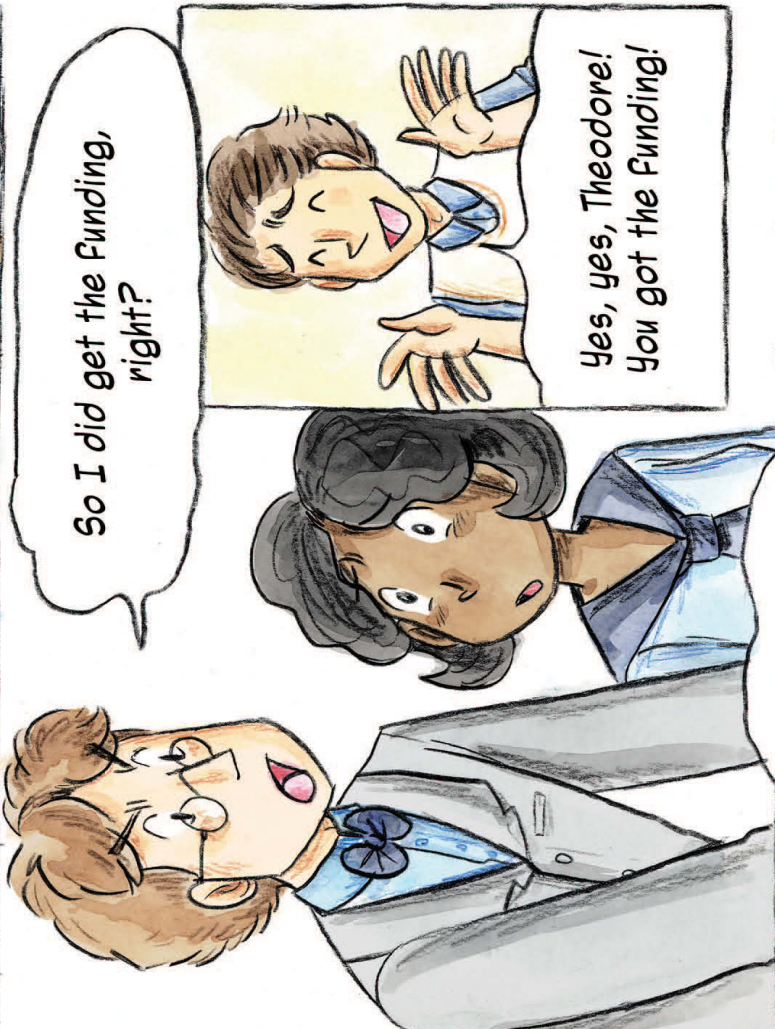
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new work
colleague is a
stickler for
rules. He *will*
be arriving at
precisely at
ten o' clock.

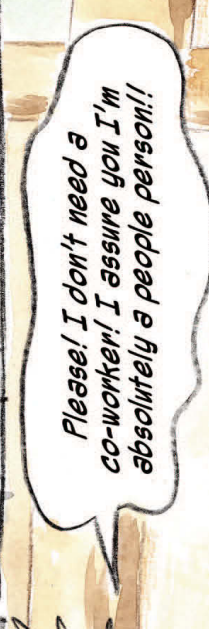
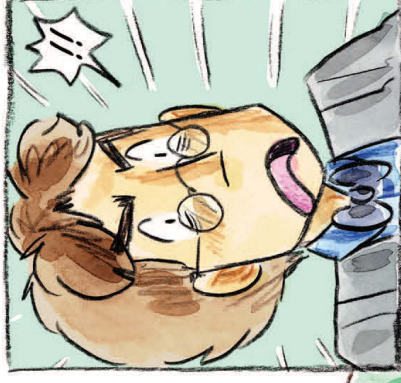
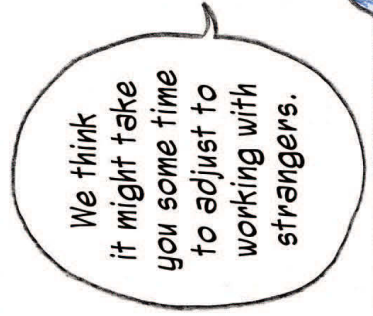
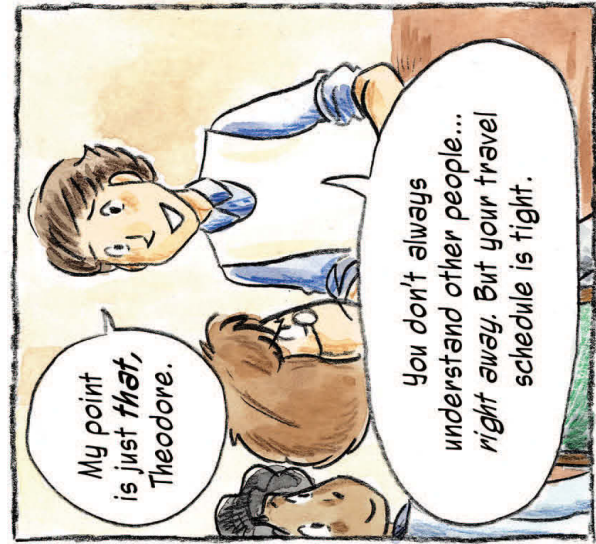
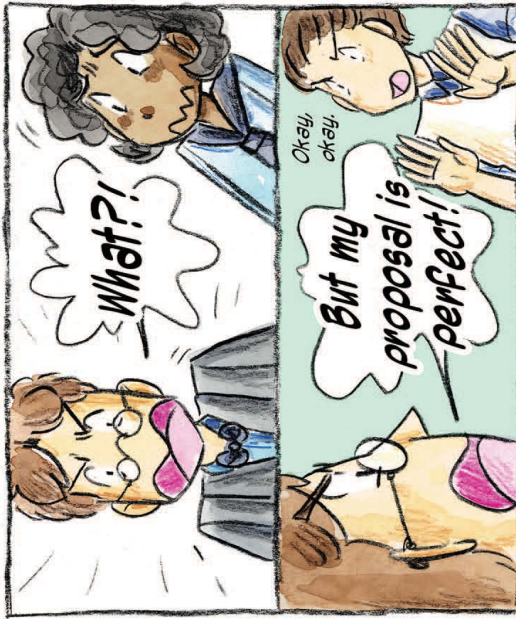
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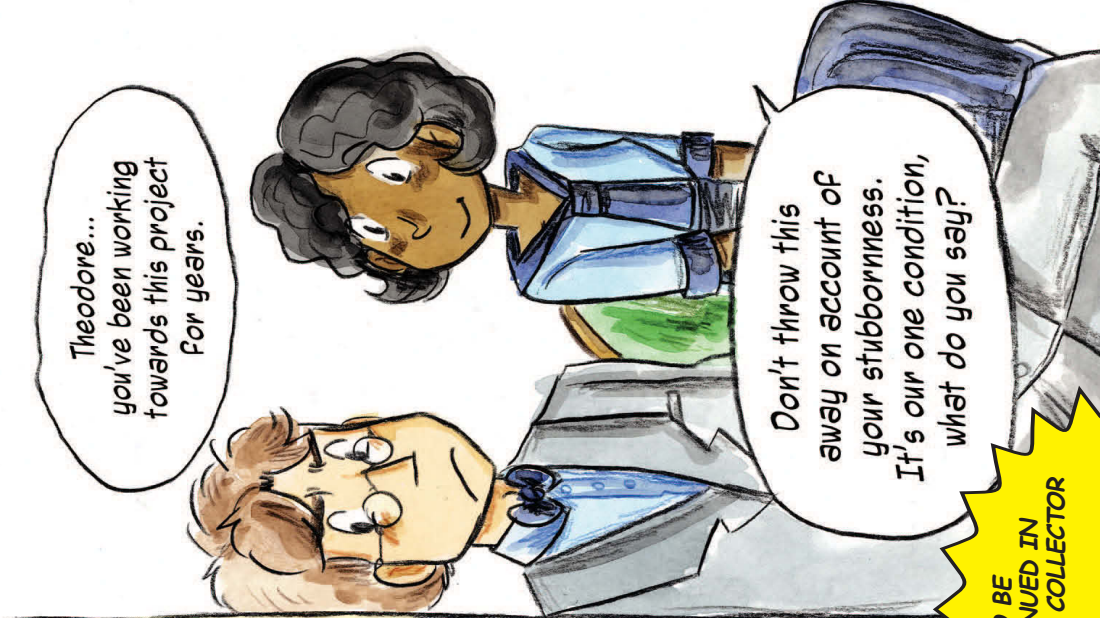
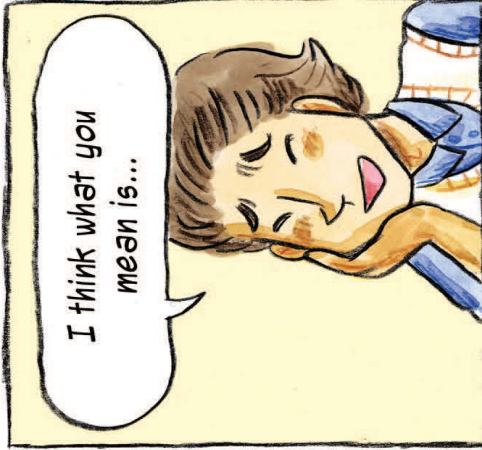
Wow,
okay!

Oh, no, that's
fine. Don't worry
about it.









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TALE OF THE TITANS

In the world of Alrest, the population lives on the backs of ancient beasts called Titans, but these creatures are dwindling in number and humanity risks extinction. NEO takes a look at Monolith Soft's latest JRPG – the epic *Xenoblade Chronicles 2*.



Rex Quests

As keen as you may be to see what the main story has on offer, a wide range of side quests are available to tempt you off the main path. Gather materials, kill monsters, investigate unusual locations... There's plenty to distract the inquisitive player for hours!

2017 has been a massive year for Nintendo. Since the launch of the Switch in March, titles like *The Legend Of Zelda: Breath Of The Wild* and *Super Mario Odyssey* have been lauded as some of the best in their genres, and now we round off the year with sprawling JRPG *Xenoblade Chronicles 2*. Announced alongside the Switch at an event in January 2017, few fans dared hope that the title would actually make its 2017 release date – not least because its predecessor, the similarly ambitious open world adventure *Xenoblade Chronicles X*, only came out two years ago. Yet here we are, the game having come out worldwide in early December, and the *Xenoblade* series is now a trilogy – a far cry from the fate that could have befallen it in different circumstances.

In fact, the *Xenoblade* franchise is one that nearly ended before it even began. Despite the original *Xenoblade Chronicles* on Wii earning much acclaim in Japan when it

came out in 2010, the game didn't appear in Europe until over a year later. A US release was only approved following Operation Rainfall – an online fan campaign started on the IGN message boards, which aimed to convince Nintendo of America to bring more JRPGs to the west.

Now three entries strong, the *Xenoblade* franchise is a firm favourite for many Nintendo gamers, praised for its vast worlds, innovative battle system, MMORPG-inspired quests, and, for the first and third entries in the series at least, a British voice cast. With the Switch offering the unique chance to take a 100+ hour JRPG on the go, there's never been a better time to get into the series with *Xenoblade Chronicles 2*.

UNREST IN ALREST

If you're a newcomer to the *Xenoblade* series, there's one thing you need to know right off the bat: despite sharing many gameplay ideas and enemy types (as well as the love-'em-or-hate-'em, egg-shaped Nopon creatures), each title is completely standalone, meaning you don't have to have played one to understand and enjoy the others. (Veterans, of course, will enjoy a few Easter eggs and references here and there.)

Xenoblade Chronicles 2 is set in the land of Alrest, where an endless Cloud Sea stretches into the distance in all directions, punctuated only by huge beasts known as Titans, alongside the World Tree, whose colossal, near unclimbable trunk towers into the heavens. Legend has it that atop the World Tree lies the fabled land of Elysium, a verdant paradise on which humans once lived alongside their creator, the Architect. However, one day, the humans were banished – a catastrophic event clouded in mystery. Since then, humanity has survived by developing settlements on the backs of Titans; however, in recent years, these creatures have been dying out, leading to tensions over land and resources between the inhabitants of each one.





Paint The Town Rex

Xenoblade Chronicles 2 is a step up for the series where towns are concerned. Not only are there more of them, but shops have an interesting system where, if you spend enough money and buy all the items on sale, you'll become the shop's owner and earn various permanent buffs for your party.



The story of *Xenoblade Chronicles 2* centres around Rex, a young man who lives alone on the back of a small Titan named Gramps. Making his living as a salvager, it's Rex's job to comb the depths of the Cloud Sea for wreckage he can sell on for a good price. He lives a simple existence, until one day he is sought out by a rich Nopon merchant, who tasks him with joining a bunch of elites to search a sunken vessel that is rumoured to house a great treasure. There, Rex happens upon Pyra, a Blade who's been sealed away in the bowels of the ship, and whose destiny to reach Elysium soon becomes inescapably intertwined with his own.

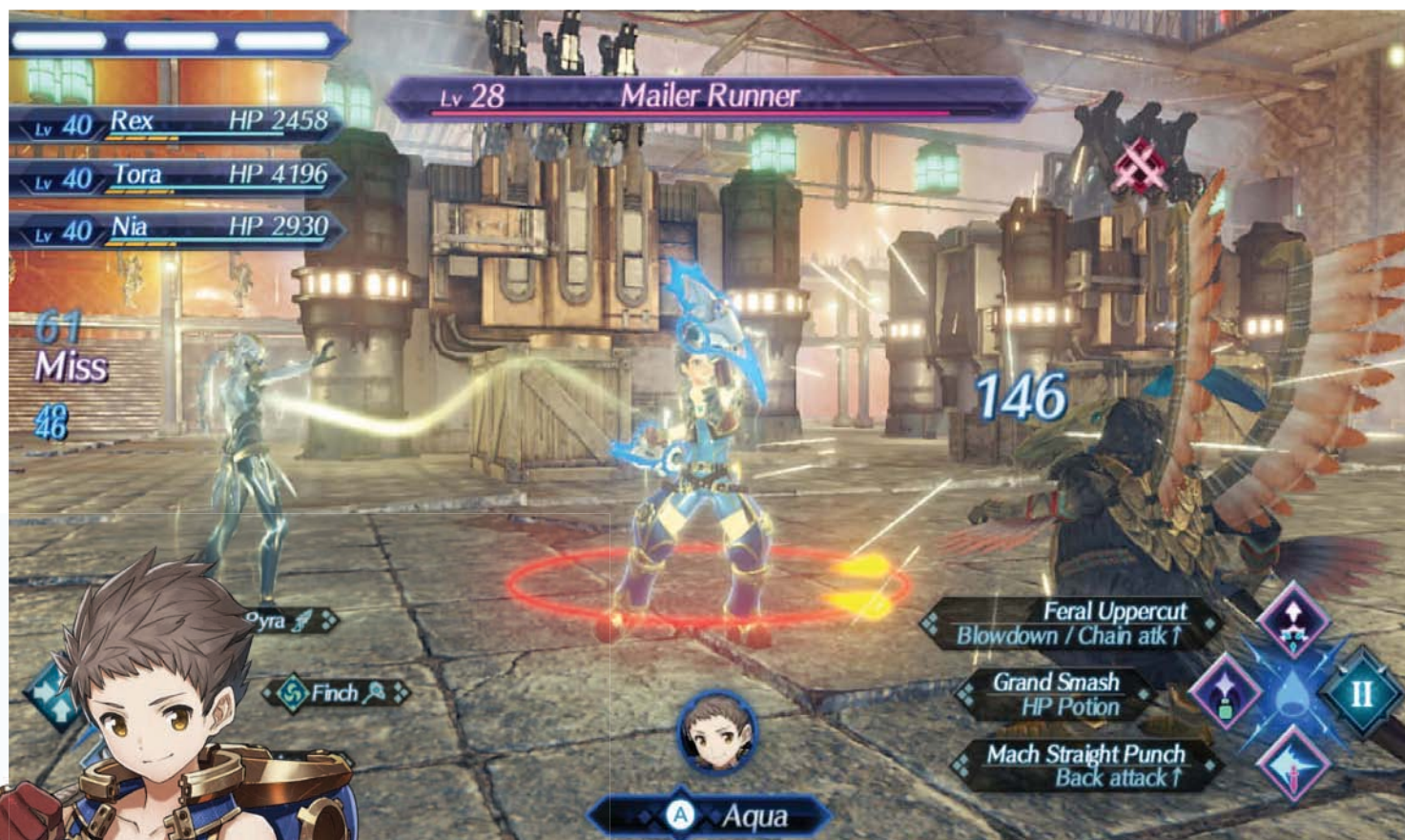
BLADE UNION

In the world of Alrest, Blades are weaponised lifeforms that have the ability to bond with human Drivers who resonate with their Core Crystal. During combat situations, Blades provide their Driver with incredible powers and weapons, whilst away from the battlefield, they serve as useful allies. On

his journey from Titan to Titan, Rex and his allies encounter Blades of many shapes and sizes, but it soon becomes apparent that there's something very special about Pyra. Not only is the emerald Core Crystal in her chest a different colour to the usual blue, but people who Rex meet on his travels refer to her as the Aegis – a legendary weapon from many hundreds of years ago. Having such a sought-after travelling companion naturally puts Rex in many a dangerous situation, and it's down to him to protect Pyra from nefarious organisations and individuals wanting to get their hands on her and exploit her powers for their own ends.

The addition of Blades as a gameplay mechanic is something that separates *Xenoblade 2*'s combat system from that of its predecessors. At any one time, Rex and his team can each be assigned up to three Blades to fight alongside, the player swapping between them with a simple touch of a direction on the D-pad after a short cooldown period has elapsed. Different Blades have their own attributes and >>>

1. *Xenoblade Chronicles 2*'s colourful main cast were designed to easily stand out from each other in battles. **2.** As an artificial Blade, Poppi is highly customisable. **3.** Bana is a rich merchant Nopon, who tasks you with exploring a sunken vessel at the start of the game – he looks pretty suspicious if you ask us...



weapons, from swords, spears and axes, to the up close and personal knuckles and heavy hitting hammers. While Rex's party will auto-attack enemies whilst engaged in combat, each Blade also provides access to three Arts. These are special moves assigned to the B, X and Y buttons (also with a cooldown period between uses) that can inflict greater damage. Repeated use of Arts also builds up a meter that charges up much more powerful Special moves, and it's down to the player to decide when is the optimum moment to unleash them and turn the tide in battle.

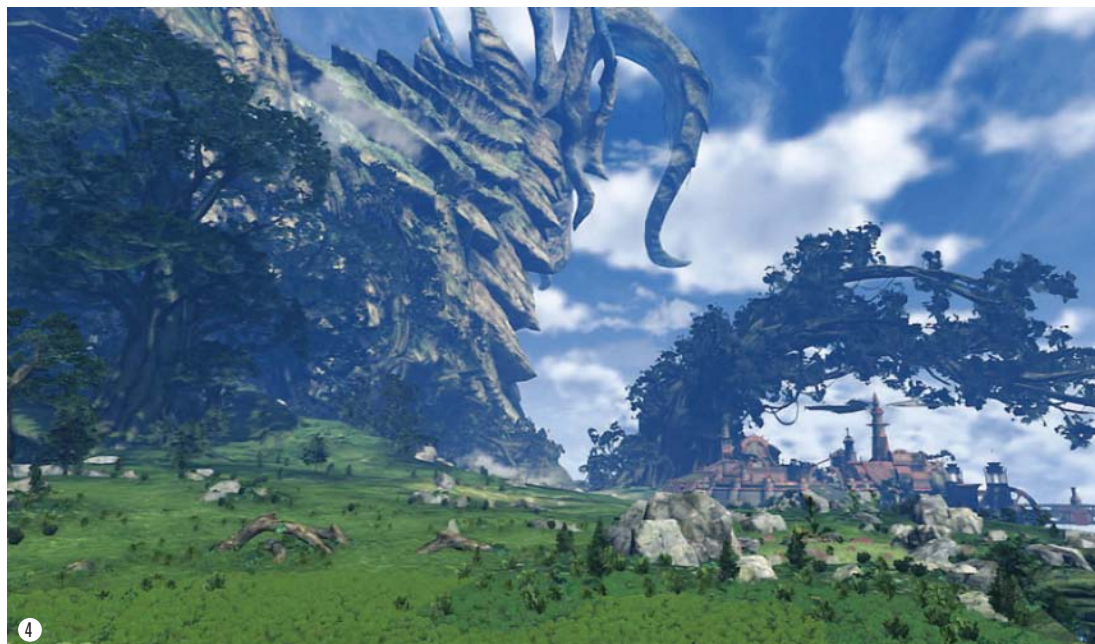
Key to victory in tougher fights, however, are various combo systems that the game offers. Driver Combos, for example, will be familiar to *Xenoblade* veterans, allowing you to stall an enemy, before toppling them, launching them into the air, and smashing them back down to the ground if the correct sequence of Arts is unleashed within a short window of opportunity. Blade Combos, meanwhile, require party members to chain together certain combinations of elemental Specials. It's a system that may sound complicated – and even look confusing when watching other players in the heat of a battle – but developers Monolith

Soft promise that it will quickly become second nature over the course of the beginning of the game.

Players are also encouraged to try out a variety of Blades to suit their play style, customising their party with a balance of attackers, tanks and healers. In addition to the main character Blades encountered over the course of the story, from the aforementioned Pyra to the regal, lion-esque Dromarch and the robotic artificial Blade Poppi, players can bond their drivers with a large number of other Blades by finding Core Crystals via enemy drops and treasure chests across the world. Though a small number of crystals will guarantee you a particular Blade when resonated with, most will unlock a Blade at random.

If you're lucky, though, you may even encounter a special Rare Blade – one with a unique look, voice and abilities. For these characters, game director Tetsuya Takahashi put out a call to a number of artists from a variety of Japanese media, resulting in an eclectic mix of designs, from the adorably cute to the surprisingly risqué. The first we unlocked, for example, was bookish history buff Adenine, designed by *Boogiepop* illustrator Kouji Ogata. Other contributing artists of note include Taiki (*Digimon World*), Takahiro Kimura (*Code Geass*), Takeshi Nohami (*Girls und Panzer*) and Nakaba Higurashi (*Baten Kaitos*).

Of course, if you've seen a picture of a Blade you like the look of, you're just going to keep your fingers crossed when resonating with a Core Crystal. In a post written for Nintendo's official website, Takahashi explains: "While there are a fair number of Rare Blades, encountering them is completely random. Although it's interesting to wonder who



"NINTENDO ARE NO STRANGERS TO TAKING A GENRE AND TURNING IT ON ITS HEAD TO GIVE IT ITS OWN SPIN, AND UNDER THEIR WATCHFUL GUIDANCE, MONOLITH SOFT HAS AIMED TO TAKE THE JRPG IN ITS OWN DIRECTION."

you will encounter, some players may also become anxious about whether they will actually meet one. I will make a firm statement. You will definitely (probably...if you're lucky?) always encounter every single Rare Blade." Well that clears that up, then!

A SWITCH IN VISUALS

One of the reasons why anime and manga artists were chosen to design many of the Blade characters is undoubtedly down to *Xenoblade Chronicles 2*'s change in visuals to a more anime style. Monolith Soft has long been praised for its excellent work when designing the sprawling landscapes on which its games play out (and much of your time with the game will be spent exploring every nook and cranny of the various Titans), but gamers have not always been so supportive of its character designs. *Xenoblade Chronicles X*, in particular, was criticised by some for having characters whose faces looked a bit too 'doll-like'.

In an interview with *Game Informer* a few months back, Takahashi acknowledged these issues. "We felt that in

Xenoblade Chronicles 1 and *X*, the facial expressions [were] kind of a little bit hard, a little bit stiff. We really wanted to put a little bit more focus on creating facial expressions and for the characters to be more expressive, and so that's why we went with the direction we did, which I guess you could say is a little bit leaning toward something like Japanese animation."

It's not just in the character designs that *Xenoblade Chronicles 2* tips its hat to anime, however. Despite being a game with a rich story containing serious undertones of war, death and religion, there are also a number of light-hearted moments. Many of these focus on the growing relationship between Pyra and Rex, who swears that his buxom companion is just an ally, but throughout the game finds himself in some amusingly compromising situations with her! (Did someone order some fanservice?) Similarly, the fluffy Nopon characters just scream series mascot, and the first scene where artificial Blade Poppi is unveiled by her Nopon creator Tora makes liberal use of anime visual motifs.

Just as the visuals have received an upgrade, *Xenoblade* fans can rest assured that just as much care has been >>>

4. Looking up from the field to see the heads of the Titans whose backs you're exploring gives a truly epic sense of scale. 5. There's a lot going on screen to keep an eye on during battle, but it soon becomes second nature. 6. The Titan Indol is home to the religious centre of Alrest.

There's More To Come!

Despite *Xenoblade Chronicles 2* being stuffed to the brim with content, Nintendo has promised a steady stream of DLC over the course of 2018, including new quests, Rare Blades, a challenge mode and, in the autumn, brand-new story content. Plenty to keep gamers coming back for the next year!



"CONTRIBUTING ARTISTS OF NOTE INCLUDE TAIKI (*DIGIMON WORLD*), TAKAHIRO KIMURA (*CODE GEASS*), TAKESHI NOHAMI (*GIRLS UND PANZER*) AND NAKABA HIGURASHI (*BATEN KAITOS*)."

>>> taken in scoring the game's soundtrack. The original on Wii was highly praised for its blend of orchestral and rock tracks, so we were thrilled to see that a number of composers from *Xenoblade Chronicles* have returned for 2, including Yasunori Mitsuda, ACE and Kenji Hiramatsu. There are over 100 tracks on the final soundtrack, in fact, with each field and town area having its own day and night themes, whilst the high-octane tunes that blast out during battles are designed to get gamers pumped!

On the subject of the game's sound design, it should be noted that *Xenoblade Chronicles 2* sees a return to the largely British accents of the first game. Rex, for example, has a loveable northern twang, whilst Nia, a defector from shady organisation Torna who joins Rex's cause early in the game, has a thick Welsh accent. Many of the guards you face earlier on wouldn't sound out of place on the streets of Glasgow. Not everyone sounds like they're from good old Blighty, though – a number of key characters are distinctly American, whilst the residents of the Urayan Titan – including the redoubtable mercenary Vandham – have an Australian drawl.

All of this adds up to a very unique JRPG. Nintendo are no strangers to taking a genre and turning it on its head to give it its own spin – see what *Splatoon* did with the third person shooter, for example – and under their watchful guidance, Monolith Soft has aimed to take the JRPG in its own direction.

Will Rex and Pyra make it to the World Tree, save humanity, and restore peace to Alrest? What secrets will they uncover on the way? And, just how long will it take you to discover all the Blades? Find out for yourself – *Xenoblade Chronicles 2* is out now, exclusively on Switch. ●



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